

PEACEWORKS

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL

Volume 15 | Issue 1 | 2025 | ISSN 2320-1754

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To cite this article:

 © 2025 Published by [Centre for Peace & Development](https://centrepeacedevelopment.com/) (CPD), Varanasi

 Published:

 Submit your article to this journal [↗](https://centrepeacedevelopment.com/)

 Volume 15, Issue 1, 2025



**CENTRE FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPEMENT, VARANASI,
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Website: <https://centrepeacedevelopment.com/>

Digital Ahimsa: Reimagining Gandhian Non-Violence as a Framework for Ethical AI and Hate Speech Moderation

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Abstract

The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence into various social media platforms has fundamentally changed how information spreads, how communities form, and, unfortunately, even how violence manifests in our everyday digital lives. Peace research has been extensively focused on direct and structural violence, while the various subtle and routine forms of violence within our algorithmic systems have remained largely unexplored.

This paper addresses that gap by posing a simple question: Can Gandhian principles of Ahimsa (non-violence) and Satyagraha (commitment to truth) provide for an ethical foundation for designing content moderation algorithms in a time marked by digital polarisation? The study uses a conceptual and philosophical approach, drawing primarily on Gandhi's own writings in *Hind Swaraj* and his essays on ethics, and situates them within current academic discussions on AI ethics, the politics of algorithms, and peace communication. The central argument is that the current moderation systems, which are largely designed based on maximising engagement, speed, and profit, often extend to what Johan Galtung would describe as "cultural violence", and these give rise to hate speech, sidelining already marginalised communities and functioning without any contextual sensitivity, which is required for a meaningful dialogue. A 'Digital Ahimsa' approach would shift and reorder these priorities by placing prevention of harm over profit, prioritising context over unchecked automation, and giving importance to truth over mere virality.

The paper does not claim that Gandhi's philosophy can be converted into software or programmed into algorithms; it presents his ethical principles as a "regulative ideal" that can guide technology developers, policymakers and digital citizens. It is possible to nurture a generation of citizens and technologists to advocate for non-violent technological STEM by incorporating peace pedagogy into digital literacy initiatives. It argues that building a culture of peace in the twenty-first century would require us to extend our concern for non-violence beyond human interaction to the algorithmic systems that increasingly shape the public discourse and social life.

Keywords: Digital Ahimsa, Gandhian Philosophy, Artificial Intelligence, Hate Speech, Structural Violence, Peace Pedagogy

Introduction

We are in a world that, with time, is increasingly mediated by algorithms. Social media platforms have become the primary arenas of public discourse; they give space for political movements to emerge, identities to be formed, and also allow communities to find a voice (Gillespie, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018). However, these digital spaces are still governed more by algorithmic systems, which are designed by a single metric: engagement rather than any civic norms or democratic deliberation (Pariser, 2011). Nowadays, outrage spreads faster than truth, misinformation travels faster than its correction, and when hate speech provokes reaction, the very system, instead of suppressing it rewards it (Sunstein, 2017). This is not a technical failure; it is more of a structural design.

Shoshana Zuboff, in her book “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism,” argues that the architecture of human surveillance capitalism transforms a human experience into a raw material for behavioural prediction and modification, establishing a logic where all values, including human dignity and social well become subordinate to profit generation (Zuboff, 2019).

Peace studies have mainly focused on violence within political institutions, economic systems, and various colonial structures. However, it is still unable to shift its attention to the algorithmic systems that now govern who speaks, who is heard, and whose truth will circulate in the public sphere.

Johan Galtung identified the three interrelated forms of violence: direct, structural, and cultural violence, which give us an analytical bridge to understand the entire phenomenon (Galtung, 1969; Galtung, 1990). Direct violence is something visible, and it is immediate, like threats, slurs, banning, or reporting a particular account to silence them. Structural violence operates within the systems and institutions that produce harm, but there is no clearly identifiable perpetrator (Galtung, 1969). Cultural violence is present in beliefs, ideas, and representations that legitimise the other two forms (Galtung, 1990).

In the context of digital systems, this occurs when an algorithm's bias is presented as neutral, helping hide the discriminatory effects it produces. As a result of this, the content moderation systems can reproduce direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence at the same time. Yet they remain largely unexamined in peace pedagogy, a gap this paper tries to address.

This paper explores whether Gandhian philosophy, specifically Ahimsa (non-violence) and Satyagraha (truth-force), can provide an ethical framework for understanding and redesigning the algorithmic content moderation systems. He argued that nonviolence is not just about physical harm; genuine nonviolence comes in the form of thought, word, and deed (Gandhi, 2001). These three frameworks are very much relevant, especially while analysing the algorithmic systems which shape how information is framed, how it is circulated, and how it is interpreted.

For Gandhi, ‘Ahimsa’ was not passive avoidance of harm, but it was a commitment to love, empathy and truth (Brown, 2008). These ideas, articulated in Gandhi’s political writings such as the Hind Swaraj, give a conceptual clarity and a moral seriousness that the current discussion about artificial intelligence ethics lacks (Gandhi, 2009).

To address this problem, the paper proposes a conceptual framework called Digital Ahimsa, suggesting that digital technologies, especially content moderation systems, should be more sensitively focused on culture and social context rather than engagement and profit. At the same time, platforms should also encourage the pursuit of truth, which is similar to the principle of Satyagraha rather than just promoting viral or emotionally charged content.

An algorithm designed to maximize profit continues to produce violence regardless of its creator's intentions. A digital Ahimsa offers an alternative moral compass where human dignity is prioritized over engagement, truth over virality, and the welfare of all over the profits of the few.

Literature Review

The rapid growth of online platforms has produced a growing literature discussing the influence of algorithmic systems on the formation of a modern public discussion. Online authors examine the concept of platform governance, arguing that online platforms are not neutral mediators but active regulators of online communication.

Tarleton Gillespie (2018) shows that content moderation systems are hidden mechanisms that determine which speech is visible on Web-based environments.

On the same note, Shoshana Zuboff describes how surveillance capitalism redesigns user behaviour and interaction as data assets which can be sold through engagement-driven algorithms. In this model, there is a tendency towards more algorithmic amplification of content that brings about a high level of emotional responses like outrage or fear.

Another related body of literature concerns algorithmic bias and the disproportionate social impact of automated decision-making. As Safiya Noble (2018) demonstrates, search engines and recommendation systems tend to reproduce the racial and gender hierarchies already existing in society. Similar arguments are made by other authors like Cathy O'Neil (2016), who believes that data-based systems may maintain inequality by entrenching historical bias into an algorithmic system. It has also been shown by research on computational linguistics that automated hate speech detection systems have a high probability of misidentifying the speech of marginalised communities, causing the disproportionate moderation of some groups (Sap et al., 2019). These articles point to the discriminatory patterns produced unintentionally but systematically by the design decisions taken by technology.

In the field of peace and conflict studies, the persuasiveness of the view that violence can be carried out through structures and cultural systems (rather than through direct physical injury) has long been recognised. Johan Galtung's direct, structural and cultural violence theory presents a perspective on how institutions and social norms can normalize harm without identifying the perpetrators. (Galtung, 1969)

Whereas this framework has been used to analyse political institutions and economies, it offers an apt way to analyse digital infrastructures that govern communication and the flow of information.

Simultaneously, Gandhian academics have been examining the implications of ethical principles such as Ahimsa (nonviolence), Satyagraha (truth-force) and Sarvodaya (the welfare of all) as a means of norming political and social institutions (Iyer, 2000; Parel, 2006). Gandhi stressed that nonviolence should work in deed, word, and thought, and he contended that unfair structures tended to breed violence through seemingly inoffensive mechanisms.

Although these are significant contributions, the current research does not often unite peace studies and Gandhian ethics with the current noise about algorithmic governance. Philosophical discussions about nonviolence have seldom been applied to technological systems, although most studies on digital platforms discuss technical regulation or policy reforms. The paper aims to fill this gap by suggesting the Digital Ahimsa conceptual framework, which views the concept of algorithmic governance through the prism of Gandhian ethics and discusses how these concepts can be applied both to the design of technologies and to the study of peace in the digital era.

Methodology

The research design embraced in this study is qualitative and conceptual research involving a combination of normative political theory and case-based research. The paper does not involve any empirical measurement or statistical modelling, instead aim to explain modern digital governance using ethical principles of the Gandhian philosophy. The philosophical concepts include Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Swadeshi, and Sarvodaya as analytical tools to explore the moral aspects of the algorithmic systems that control communication on digital platforms.

The analysis relies on interdisciplinary approaches of peace studies, media studies, and technology ethics. The concept of algorithmic systems extends ways of harm contained within technological mechanisms to understand how harm and abuse may be reproduced through the theoretical framework of Johan Galtung's direct, structural, and cultural violence. Moreover, the research on algorithmic bias, content moderation, and platform governance is reviewed, which helps to place the discussion within the existing discussion of the ethical issues of digital regulation and artificial intelligence.

The paper also cites the selected contemporary case studies to demonstrate these dynamics. These contain examples of algorithm bias in hate speech detection systems that work automatically, the Bulli Bai and Sulli Deals cases in India, and how social media sites contribute to the spread of anti-Rohingya hate speech in Myanmar. These instances are not taken as direct empirical evidence but rather work as examples to show how engagement-based algorithms may be useful to proliferate misinformation, discrimination, and online harassment.

The paper addresses how Gandhian ethics apply to the design and management of digital technologies by drawing on philosophical insight with current case examples. The aim of the work will hence not be to quantify the level of bias in algorithms, but rather to explore the creation of a new normative framework known as Digital Ahimsa that can be used to discuss the ethical nature of technologies, the accountability of platforms, and peace pedagogy during the era of algorithms.

What Ahimsa and Satyagraha Mean

Gandhi's idea of Ahimsa was not just about physical violence; he saw non-violence as a comprehensive ethical discipline where individuals would be "non-violent in thought, word and deed." This triple framework is significant because it recognises that violence is not just limited to physical harm; it can also manifest in our intentions, attitudes, language and way of thinking. Gandhi believed that harbouring hatred, speaking harshly or spreading lies are also forms of violence which can cause equal damage as physical aggression.

For Gandhi, Ahimsa was an active and morally demanding practice grounded in love, compassion and the pursuit of truth (Gandhi, 2001; Brown, 2008). He believed that true non-violence comes from constant self-discipline and inner transformation.

Gandhi said, "For me, the only certain means of knowing God is non-violence, ahimsa, love."

This statement showed that Gandhi did not view nonviolence as just a political strategy but also as a spiritual and metaphysical principle. According to his philosophy, the search for truth (Satya) and the practice of nonviolence (Ahimsa) cannot exist without each other. Gandhi saw Ahimsa as a positive and transformative principle that shaped how individuals thought, spoke, and acted in the world. (Gandhi, 2001; Brown, 2008).

Gandhi viewed harm as operating across several levels simultaneously. According to him, violence is not just physical, but it can also be carried out through speech, humiliation, marginalisation, misrepresentation, and also through ideological systems that categorise human beings as worthy or unworthy of dignity. (Iyer, 2000)

Gandhi, in his book *Hind Swaraj*, discussed how systems which appear to be neutral also contain embedded forms of violence, and how this structure of domination is portrayed as something natural. He believed that modern civilisation is also a form of organised violence as it subordinates human dignity to the demands of machinery, material progress, and profit. The concept of Satyagraha, which is often translated as "truth-force," is very closely connected to Ahimsa. In his *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi differentiated Satyagraha from what was commonly described as passive resistance, as he believed it was misleading. (Gandhi, 2009)

According to him, passive resistance was adopted by the weak when other options were unavailable, and the moment physical force became possible, it was abandoned. Satyagraha was about moral courage and active ethical engagement. It meant to disobey unjust laws at the same time willingly accepting the punishment which came with it, choosing "the laws of morality instead of the laws of the state. (Gandhi, 2001)

Thus, accepting the punishment, the suffering was not an act of submission but it was a form of moral testimony. Gandhi said, In the use of satyagraha, there is no ill will. Satyagraha is pure soul force. In other words, in Satyagraha, power did not lie in domination but in the moral integrity and clarity of the person practicing it. (Parel, 2006)

How Current Algorithms Violate Ahimsa

Gandhi insisted that Ahimsa should operate in thought, word, and deed as it offers a powerful framework for looking into the ethical failures of the contemporary content moderation systems (Gandhi, 2001). If we look through the lens of the triple framework, the current algorithmic systems fail not just as technical instruments but also as moral agents. These systems give rise to harm across all three Gandhian dimensions, generating forms of himsa (violence) that manifest through language, cognition, and structural outcomes.

Over-Moderation as Violence Against Marginalized Voices

The first and most major form of violence that occurs in the realm of words is when there is an algorithmic over-moderation that suppresses the voices of marginalised communities. The automatic moderation systems most of the time engage in both over-blocking and under-blocking, which allow the proliferation of hate speech online but silence them when they describe their lived experiences of discrimination.

As a result of this cycle, people from marginalized groups may find their expressions about racism, sexism, or discrimination being wrongly labelled as offensive or hateful.

Research in computational linguistics studies which was conducted in the year 2019, it was found that tweets written in African American English (AAE) were significantly more likely to be labelled as offensive or flagged compared to others (Sap et al., 2019). As many moderation systems are mainly trained on standardised language datasets, language patterns that are associated with marginalised communities are sometimes considered toxic language. In many instances, posts describing experiences of racial discrimination were wrongly classified and considered as abusive content and thus removed. This shows how linguistic bias is deeply embedded within training data, which leads to systematic silencing. If we look through the Gandhian perspective, this is also a form of violence, not through physical force but through the suppression of expression and dignity.

This shows the kind of 'himsa precisely' that Gandhi identified (Gandhi, 2001). Language which is intended for empowerment and solidarity is mistaken as offensive content and incorrectly removed. In such cases, the algorithm, the system, does not merely fail; it inadvertently reproduces the harm it was designed to prevent.

Under-Moderation of Implicit Hate as a Failure of Truth-Seeking

The second ethical failure happens through under-moderation, where the harmful messages expressed indirectly remain undetected. AI can easily detect explicit slurs and swear words, whereas hateful, intolerant messages get hidden through coded language, embedded nuances rather than hateful slurs (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017).

There are various empirical findings where it has been seen that the current algorithmic moderation does not promote democratic discourse; rather, it deters by silencing the uncivil but the pro-democratic voices of the marginalised while allowing discriminatory rhetoric disguised in coded language to circulate widely.

This can be seen in the Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai incidents in India, which happened in 2021 and 2022. In this case, some anonymous developers created online platforms where

photographs of Muslim women journalists, activists, and public figures were displayed and were falsely presented as if they were being “auctioned”. More than one hundred Muslim women were targeted. Terms like “Sulli” and “Bulli” were used, which were derogatory slurs directed towards Muslim women in Hindi and Urdu. As many moderation systems are trained mainly on English datasets, these culture-specific slurs went undetected by auto-filters, allowing the content to circulate widely before it was removed. (BBC News, 2022)

This incident shows how algorithmic moderation systems often fail to recognize hate speech which are context specific. If we look through Gandhi’s perspective, this failure comes into conflict with the principle of Satyagraha, which emphasizes commitment to truth even in the face of persecution (Gandhi, 2009). If the systems which claim to regulate harmful speech are unable to recognise subtle forms of misinformation and dehumanization, they allow falsehoods and prejudice to spread unchallenged. This undermines the pursuit of truth, which Gandhi had considered essential for moral and social progress.

"Neutral Code" as Cultural Violence

The widespread claim that algorithmic systems are neutral or objective is also harmful; the algorithmic systems portray the cultural and social biases that are present in societies where they are designed (O’Neil, 2016). Most of the social media platforms are developed in Western countries, and their algorithmic systems show these countries’ existing racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist power structures. As the algorithms are trained on datasets made by human moderators, over time biases of the moderators are trained on machine learning algorithms to internalize the patterns in those datasets. If such systems are described as “neutral code,” it obscures how social and cultural assumptions shape algorithmic outcomes. There are various studies where it has been seen that AI-based content moderation misunderstands local contexts and systematically marginalizes users. In Gandhian terms, the claim of neutrality is itself a form of deception, a violation of Satya (truth).

Engagement Optimization as the Abandonment of Human Dignity

Gandhi warned about separating means from ends, arguing that unjust methods end up corrupting the outcomes. This is more evident in the context of engagement-driven algorithms, which are used by major social media platforms. These systems are designed in such a way that they have maximum user interaction, as higher engagement gives greater advertising revenue. To maintain this revenue generation, content that provokes strong emotional responses like anger, outrage, or fear is more promoted by the algorithm.

Various reports have shown that Facebook (Meta) content which generate large number of “angry” reactions was often related to misinformation, sensationalism, or polarizing content (Vaidhyathan, 2018). Yet the platform continued to promote such posts because they generated a high level of user activity. It can be said that the architecture of the system rewarded that very content which undermined healthy public discourse.

The consequence of this architectural design logic was tragically visible in Myanmar, where hate speech targeting the Rohingya Muslim minority spread widely on Facebook. Investigations conducted by the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding

Mission on Myanmar (2018) concluded that the platform played a major role in enabling the rapid spread of anti-Rohingya propaganda and misinformation. These narratives contributed to the escalating communal tensions which culminated in mass violence and displacement.

If we look at this scenario through a Gandhian perspective, this shows the ethical dangers of technologies which are built primarily around profit and engagement. In such cases, the means-the engagement at any cost inevitably shapes the ends, showing precisely the moral warning which Gandhi articulated more than a century ago (Gandhi, 2001).

What "Digital Ahimsa" Would Look Like

The current algorithmic system is creating a systematic breach of Ahimsa, which is creating violence in thinking, saying, and acting; then a significant question arises: what would a non-violent digital architecture be like? Digital Ahimsa is not just a demand for more compassionate technology, based on the notion that good intentions suffice. Rather, it suggests a list of design principles that are based on the philosophy of Gandhi, which matches the purpose of technological design with the ethical purpose it is said to achieve. The ideas of Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Swadeshi, and Sarvodaya are mutually related concepts that can be translated into some practical principles according to which the algorithmic systems should be worked out and managed.

Harm Prevention Over Profit: Rejecting Engagement-Maximising Design

The reorganisation of priorities is the most basic change that a Digital Ahimsa framework needs. The unity of means and ends as demanded by Gandhi makes engagement-optimised design not ethically viable (Gandhi, 2001). When platforms purposefully design algorithms to increase user time on their site, even when internal data shows that outrage and misinformation are the motivators behind that interaction, they are guilty of Ahimsa at the structural level. The damage that is being done is not accidental; it is designed.

A non-violent algorithm would also be best optimized on well-being metrics: is this content relevant to informed public discussions? Is it giving voice to marginalized voices without taking advantage of them? Does it foster respectful interaction and understanding across differences? These are criteria that are not being quantified now since they do not produce advertising revenue. If looked through a Gandhian lens, a platform that consciously puts profit above the psychological and social damage it is facilitating is perpetrating structural violence - diffused, invisible, and, thus, all the more insidious.

Gandhi cautioned that the end will always be corrupted by the means; a platform that relies on stoking anger as its source of income can never proclaim the aim of human contact. The Ahimsa-oriented AI framework is an experimental ethical model grounded in the principle of non-violence.

It seeks to operationalise Ahimsa by integrating multiple layers of content moderation, including context-sensitive analysis, semantic detection, external moderation mechanisms, and evaluative judgment. Rather than relying solely on keyword-based filtering, the framework emphasises a nuanced interpretation of language and context to distinguish harmful content

from legitimate expression. Its objective is to minimise false positives that may inadvertently silence marginalised communities while maintaining robust detection of genuinely harmful content.

In doing so, the framework demonstrates how the philosophical principle of Ahimsa can be translated into a practical ethical guideline for the design and governance of AI-based content moderation systems.

Context Sensitivity: Swadeshi and the Local in the Global

The other important principle that can be applied to digital governance is the concept of ‘Swadeshi’ introduced by Gandhi that underlines the value of community context and local knowledge. Moderation systems that are currently in use tend to work with the help of a universal model that imposes the same norms in different cultural settings. Because these systems are often trained on datasets in English and Western patterns of communication, they tend to misunderstand the expressions of any other language or culture.

As an example, a term that seems to be offensive individually can be a kind of solidarity or resistance in a certain society. In the same way, culturally specific expressions or political phrases can be interpreted as threatening words when analysed without consideration of their social and cultural context. In these instances, algorithms fail to distinguish between genuine hate speech and legitimate forms of expression, inadvertently penalising the very communities they are intended to protect.

A Digital Ahimsa framework would therefore advocate for context-driven moderation systems that account for linguistic diversity, cultural nuances, speaker intent, and the broader purpose of communication. This approach draws upon Gandhi's ethical understanding of non-violence, which emphasised the importance of intention in evaluating human actions. Gandhi distinguished between harm inflicted deliberately and harm arising from ignorance or misunderstanding (Gandhi, 2001). Applying this principle to AI moderation does not imply that abusive or harmful language should be tolerated. Rather, it suggests that ethical moderation should extend beyond simple keyword detection to incorporate contextual interpretation and human judgment. Such systems should also be developed in continuous consultation with the communities they affect, ensuring that moderation practices are both culturally informed and socially just.

Truth-Seeking Over Virality: Digital Satyagraha

The idea of Satyagraha, which is translated as truth-force and is a main concept in Gandhi, revolves around the great devotion to the truth and moral courage (Parel, 2006). This principle poses significant questions in terms of the spread of information on digital platforms. The present algorithmic systems give priority to attention-generating content, whether it is accurate or not (Sunstein, 2017). Sensational or misleading news tends to spread more quickly than reporting that is verified, as this generates more emotional responses (Vaidhyathan, 2018).

The social media platform should implement more robust systems of identifying and curbing the dissemination of repeatedly disproven assertions, and should invest in fact-checking systems as a crucial component of the digital infrastructure.

Digital Satyagraha would also entail transparency. The users must be provided with simple explanations regarding why some content is shown in their feeds, how the recommendation systems work, and how their data influences the algorithmic decisions.

This focus on openness conforms to the larger concept of Swaraj, or self-rule, that was used by Gandhi. To engage appropriately in a digital society, people need to be familiar with systems in which they construct their information space. In the absence of this knowledge, the user is unable to exercise real independence in their online engagement. Digital Satyagraha also suggests some level of self-responsibility. As Gandhi talked about ethical discipline in social life, users need to build habits of fact-checking, avoid outrage-sharing, and interact in a respectful way with different opinions.

Inclusive Design: Sarvodaya and the Welfare of All

The most radical requirement of a Digital Ahimsa architecture, perhaps, is the one based on the idea of Gandhi, Sarvodaya - the good of all, not the good of the majority or most lucrative population group (Iyer, 2000). Gandhi took this phrase and changed it by insisting that a just society would not be judged by aggregate prosperity but by whether or not the most vulnerable members of the society were safeguarded and accommodated. In algorithmic design, Sarvodaya poses a firm challenge of how content moderation systems are being constructed and regulated.

Such systems are created by engineers who have Silicon Valley training, and are spread around with little significant contribution to them locally by the people who bear the greatest impact of their actions.

This is the institutional opposite of Sarvodaya. A Digital Ahimsa framework would rather require that the communities who are affected not be research subjects or focus groups, but that they become the co-designers with real power over the systems that control what they say. It would involve multi-stakeholder forms of governance whereby the representatives of civil society, academic researchers, and community advocates would have actual decision-making authority alongside corporate legal teams. Most importantly, it would demand that the groups of people who suffer the most due to the presence of algorithmic violence, namely the communities that are over-moderated to silence and under-protected against targeted harassment, need to be the first to be served by a reformed system.

Sarvodaya cannot allow the logic of acceptable losses. There is no community which is indispensable; no harm is an acceptable externality. A technology that safeguards but destroys others has not brought non-violence; it has just apportioned violence.

The Means Are the Ends: A Note on Process

The most fundamental methodological insistence underlying all the four pillars is that the end is the means in the making, according to Gandhi. Non-violent goals are not enough to be stated

when the development, implementation, and administration of the algorithmic systems are violent.

This implies that the very design process has to reflect the values it is trying to advance. Regular ethical audits by various stakeholders, mitigation of bias seen as a continuous process and not a single-time solution, grievance mechanisms for those who are harmed by algorithmic choices, and information on successes and failures are not optional additions.

They constitute the practice of Digital Ahimsa. Technological decisions are never value-neutral, as Gandhi understood. Technology should be evaluated on its fruits - on its effects upon human dignity, and upon the distribution of power, and upon the quality of truth in the life of the people. Digital Ahimsa is not offering an ideal system. It demands an honest one.

Peace Pedagogy in the Age of Algorithms

The above discussion has shown that algorithmic systems are not impartial technological tools. Rather, they are strong formations that define communication, visibility, and discourse in the public. By doing so, they can reproduce forms of violence of thought, word, and deed; however, they can also be more ethical and inclusive in communication if they are designed differently. This identification has significant consequences for peace education. If peace studies continue to retain their traditional sense of war, intergroup violence, or institutional injustice, it may be missing out on the digital space, which is increasingly shaping the way individuals perceive the world. This is why the classroom should also be turned into a place where the digital forms of violence are identified, critically examined, and challenged.

Why Peace Pedagogy Must Address the Digital Realm

Peace scholar Johan Galtung, who identified three forms of violence, namely direct, structural, and cultural, gives us a path ahead.

Algorithmic systems can create all three forms of violence at the same time, as this paper has argued. Direct violence can manifest itself in the form of silencing marginalized voices with a high level of moderation or harassment. Structural violence is created when a few profit-making platforms control the flow of information and communication at enormous proportions. Cultural violence takes place when discriminative technological systems are brought forth as neutral infrastructures, such that discrimination seems to be apparent or unavoidable.

Peace education has traditionally provided students with the instruments to be aware of structural and cultural violence within political and economic structures. Nevertheless, with the rise of digital platforms influencing the agenda of the masses, the tools of analysis also need to be implemented in relation to algorithmic governance. Understanding how digital systems are having an impact on communication, identity, and power is now a part of peace, conflict, and social justice studies.

International institutions also support the necessity of this change. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) place much importance on education in achieving peaceful and inclusive societies. SDG 4.7 addresses the need to have educational strategies that promote global citizenship, cultural diversity, and a culture of peace. However, these aims are

hard to realize in the online space where algorithms occasionally boost hate speech or suppress minorities. On the same note, SDG 16, which aims at establishing peaceful and inclusive societies, cannot be achieved in total if digital platforms continue to prioritize engagement rather than fairness and accountability. Peace educators who take on such commitments should therefore also discuss the ethical and political consequences of algorithmic systems.

Teaching Critical Algorithmic Literacy

At the foundational level, students should be taught how to identify the algorithms that shape their daily online lives. It involves going beyond mere digital literacy, which is being familiar with how to use social media applications or search engines, to a more in-depth knowledge of how these systems construct knowledge and power. Researchers like Safiya Noble have demonstrated how search engines and recommendation systems can recreate the existing social order, influencing which voices are visible and which remain marginalised.

By analysing the studies on algorithmic bias and moderation practices, the educator will be able to make the students aware of how the technological design and its social effects are interconnected. As an example, studies showing racial discrimination in hate-speech detection, or the over-censorship of marginalized groups, depict how design choices have an impact on actual human beings.

Students will be able to learn how to follow the line of the technical decisions taken by engineers and the experiences of the users all over the world. A move taken in one of the headquarters of a technology firm may end up defining what a person in another region of the world can say, see, or post on the internet.

Another piece of work that can assist students in comprehending the economic reasoning of these systems is the work by Shoshana Zuboff. Her surveillance capitalism analysis describes the approach of digital platforms to user attention as a resource. The engagement of the user in this model is the product being sold to the advertisers. Consequently, the emotional responses, especially outrage or fear, tend to make more money than a dispassionate or thoughtful conversation. By learning this economic model, students can be able to critically assess the motivation behind the design of digital platforms.

Digital Satyagraha as Pedagogical Practice

Peace education must not merely promote critical thinking, but also equip students to act constructively. Here, the concept of Satyagraha or truth-force developed by Gandhi can provide a valuable guide. Digital Satyagraha in the digital environment can mean the advocacy of truth, responsibility, and ethical interaction in the digital environment.

At the personal level, this can be done by forming the habit of checking information before sharing, not succumbing to the urge to share outraged content, and speaking respectfully to individuals who express a differing opinion. The practices can be understood as a sign of Gandhi, who believed that real social change must start with self-ethical discipline. On a larger scale, collective action is also present in Digital Satyagraha. Students can understand how social movements and civil society groups are using their voice to demand more accountability

from technology companies. Campaigns that put pressure on platforms that have harmful policies prove that public engagement can affect digital governance.

Educational programs that have elements of global citizenship education, including those advocated by UNESCO, can make students view digital responsibility as a part of their role in the global society as active participants.

Finally, educational institutions must follow the values it teaches. An institution cannot promote digital nonviolence if they themselves ignore the platforms that violate those principles, or fail to protect their own students from online harassment. Institutions of higher education must engage critically with the technologies they adopt and should create policies that protect students and staff in digital spaces. Thus, peace pedagogy in the twenty-first century is incomplete if we don't acknowledge these challenges, as that is how we can prepare students to build more just, responsible, and inclusive digital futures.

Conclusion

The discourse discussed in the paper shows that algorithmic systems have ceased being technical infrastructures that work in the background of digital communication. They are now potent social forces that determine visibility, participation, and movement of truth in the modern publicity world. It is the systems of content moderation, systems of recommendation, and systems of engagement-driven platforms that dictate whose voices are listened to, whose experiences are silenced, and whose stories are accepted as valid in online environments. As the discussion above has demonstrated, these systems can generate various types of violence at once, such as silencing marginalized groups by over-moderating, allowing coded hate speech by under-moderating, and obscuring the structural inequalities under the banner of technological neutrality. In this manner, algorithmic governance recreates the patterns of harm that are quite similar to those that peace theorists have been describing as direct, structural, and cultural violence.

This paper has made the case that the ethical vices of algorithmic systems can be interpreted through the prism of the Gandhian philosophy as a failure of Ahimsa that exists in the domain of thought, word, and deed. When digital platforms give more importance to engagement over well-being, profit over dignity, and virality over truth, they bring in forms of himsa within the communication architecture. The Digital Ahimsa framework in this paper is thus an attempt to transcend criticism by presenting a different ethical direction of technological design and control. Based on Gandhian principles of Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Swadeshi, and Sarvodaya, it implies that the digital systems should be considered not only in terms of efficiency or profitability but also in terms of their influence on human dignity, fairness, and the process of truth seeking.

Prevention should be prioritized above engagement optimization; context-specific moderation should be used instead of universal and culturally blind models; truth-seeking should be prioritized above virality; and the interests of vulnerable users should be prioritized regarding the design and regulation of the algorithmic systems. These values are not only moral ideals but also provide effective principles of how digital technologies can be reformed to cause the

least possible harm and promote responsible and inclusive communication. The consequences of this change are not only in the area of technological design but also in the domain of peace education. The growing influence of technology and digital platforms, the scope of peace pedagogy needs to be broadened to cover algorithmic governance. Knowledge, power, and visibility: The role of algorithms in comprehending conflict, justice, and social transformation in the twenty-first century is now part of the required study of conflict.

When Gandhi stated that the end is the means in the making is a strong reminder of the fact that the ethical nature of technological systems is dictated by the principles that are used to design them. The digital world, which is planned around dignity, truth, and nonviolence, will not arise out of technological advancement. It should be deliberately developed using moral thinking, democracy, and accountability of the institutions. Digital Ahimsa is thus a concept that urges scholars and technologists, educators and even citizens to envision and create digital infrastructures that can foster peace as opposed to replicating violence.

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Socialisation of Novice Monks in Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries: A Sociological Study of Cultural Reproduction and Moral Agency

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To cite this article:

 © 2025 Published by Centre for Peace & Development (CPD), Varanasi

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 Volume 15, Issue 1, 2025



**CENTRE FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPEMENT, VARANASI,
221005**



Website: <https://centrepeacedevelopment.com/>

Socialisation of Novice Monks in Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries: A Sociological Study of Cultural Reproduction and Moral Agency

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on Tibetan Buddhist monasticism has frequently portrayed monasteries as homogeneous institutions and monks as passive carriers of institutionalised religious values. This study critically re-examines such assumptions by focusing on the lived experiences of novice monks and the role of the monastic social environment in shaping their moral and cultural orientations in Tawang. Rather than viewing monastic life as a fixed system of cultural transmission, this research foregrounds the dynamic and context-specific processes through which norms and values are internalised, negotiated, and reinterpreted. Employing a qualitative research design, the study draws upon multiple methodological approaches, including survey interviews, life history narratives, case studies, and non-participant observation. These methods enable a deeper exploration of everyday monastic life and challenge linear, top-down models of socialisation that assume a one-way transmission of religious ideals from institution to individual. Instead, the findings reveal a more complex and interactive process in which novice monks actively engage with their social environment. The study demonstrates that monasteries function not merely as sites of cultural reproduction but as dynamic social arenas where meanings, identities, and moral frameworks are continuously shaped through lived experience. Interactions within the monastic community, as well as between monks and lay society, play a crucial role in this process. Two distinct yet overlapping orientations emerge from the analysis. The first is a pastoral orientation, which emphasises service, ritual engagement, and responsiveness to the needs of the lay community. The second is a coenobitic orientation, which prioritises internal monastic discipline, collective living, and the pursuit of spiritual development within the monastery. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of “ordinary” monks (*trapa*), this study contributes to a more nuanced and grounded understanding of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. It highlights monastic life as a lived, socially embedded practice shaped by negotiation, agency, and interaction, rather than as a static institutional form governed solely by doctrine.

Keywords: Socialisation, Tibetan Buddhism, Monasticism, Tawang, Cultural Reproduction, Moral Agency

Note on the Use of Sanskrit, Pali, and Tibetan Terms

In the study of Tibetan Buddhism, variations in terminology and spelling are common across different texts and scholarly traditions. For this thesis, I have adopted a flexible yet consistent approach to language usage, guided primarily by the linguistic practices of my research participants. Accordingly, I have predominantly used Tibetan terms, as they most accurately reflect the lived experiences and everyday discourse of the monastic community under study. At the same time, certain Sanskrit and Pali terms are more widely recognised within the broader

fields of Buddhology and Tibetology. In such cases, and to avoid unnecessary confusion, I have retained these commonly accepted terms, particularly in the theoretical sections of the thesis. Furthermore, when referencing specific scholarly works that employ terminology from a particular linguistic tradition, I have followed the usage adopted by those authors, especially where such terms are well established among scholars and students in the field.

A useful example is the canonical text outlining monastic rules and regulations. While it is generally referred to by its Sanskrit name, *Vinaya*, the equivalent Tibetan term is *Dulwa*. In this thesis, I employ *Vinaya* primarily in theoretical discussions, whereas *Dulwa* is used in the analysis of field data to remain faithful to the linguistic context of the participants. All unfamiliar or specialised terms are presented in italics, with their meanings explained in the glossary provided at the end of this work. About transcription, it is important to note that I have studied Tibetan and can therefore comment on its orthographic and phonetic representation. Accurately rendering Tibetan words into the Roman (often referred to as “Arabic”) script presents certain challenges, as phonetic spellings vary considerably across authors and transcription systems. Rather than strictly adhering to any one standardised system, I have opted for commonly used spellings found across multiple sources. Additionally, to enhance accessibility for non-specialist readers, I have prioritised phonetic clarity by spelling words in a manner that approximates their actual pronunciation, rather than reproducing technically exact but potentially less intuitive transliterations.

Introduction

This study is based on fieldwork conducted at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in north-western Tawang, a predominantly Tibetan Buddhist region situated at an altitude of approximately 3048 meters amidst the mighty Himalayas. Tawang Monastery belongs to the influential Gelukpa order of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. Tawang is both historically significant and naturally endowed. It is located at a distance of 185 km from Bomdila and lies at an altitude of about 3025 meters above sea level. The inhabitants of the district primarily belong to the Monpa tribe. During my previous field visit to Sarnath, I found it crucial to interview and observe both children and adults. I therefore focused my research particularly on a specific group of children within a Tibetan religious community: the child monks of Tawang Monastery. My interest in Tibetan Buddhism, the “Tibetan case,” and children as active social agents are the primary motivations behind selecting this subject.

The overall objective of this study is thus to examine how novice monks in Buddhist monasteries are socialised and how they internalise norms, values, and cultural practices within their society. In fulfilling this objective, it is hoped that the study will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of ordinary Tibetan Buddhist novice monks than is currently available in existing literature, while also providing an intimate and nuanced portrait of a compelling cultural lifestyle. Monasticism, as a cultural institution, structurally removes the individual from “mainstream” society in favour of a lifestyle oriented toward transcendent spirituality, thereby imbuing all aspects of life with a distinct sense of religiosity. In Tibetan culture, children occupy a particularly significant role. Through lived experience and observation, it becomes evident that children are viewed not only as inheritors of culture but

more specifically as custodians of religious continuity and identity. For the concept of “social environment,” this study adopts the definition provided by Barnett and Casper, who describe it as “the immediate physical surroundings, social relationships, and cultural milieus within which defined groups of people function and interact” (2001, 465). This includes geography, architecture, infrastructure, social organisation, demographics, traditions, norms, and customs that collectively shape the atmosphere of a defined human space. Monastic life, by virtue of being a bounded and structured community, offers a particularly suitable and methodologically convenient context for examining such a social environment.

Tibetan Buddhist monasticism in Tawang is especially well-suited for a study of this nature. It is one of the few remaining regions where traditional Tibetan values associated with what Melvyn Goldstein has termed “mass monasticism” have been preserved in a relatively unchanged form over several centuries. A defining feature of this system is its emphasis on recruiting a large number of male individuals into the monastic order at a very young age, thereby ensuring that the bulk of their socialisation occurs within the monastic environment itself. Recruitment practices often involve limited consideration of individual personality or inclination, as many are selected during childhood for a lifelong monastic path. Consequently, monastic communities in Tawang are composed not of individuals united by a prior shared inclination toward contemplative life—as seen in many other monastic traditions—but rather of diverse individuals who are collectively socialised into an alternative cultural framework from an early age.

Following the upheaval of Tibetan religious culture initiated by the 1959 Lhasa Uprising against Chinese occupation, much of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic system was disrupted across the broader Tibetan cultural sphere. However, Tawang, along with a few other Himalayan regions, largely escaped this transformation and has continued to preserve its traditional monastic culture, albeit while facing its own set of contemporary challenges. These challenges stem both from its historical connections to centralised Tibetan monastic institutions and from broader social changes over the past half-century. At the same time, regions such as Ladakh present a unique comparative context due to their position at the intersection of major world religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam—while Tawang’s growing emergence as a tourist destination further situates its monastic culture within a dynamic and diverse socio-cultural landscape. Historically, much of the scholarly work on Tibetan Buddhist monasticism has focused on its rich textual traditions—its doctrines, philosophies, and liturgical practices. As a result, Tibetan Buddhism has often been represented through translations and philosophical expositions, contributing to a popular image of the maroon-robed monk as a sage-like embodiment of profound spiritual wisdom. Many academic studies have similarly concentrated on a small monastic elite, including reincarnate lamas, highly educated scholar-monks, and practitioners of esoteric traditions. While such studies have significantly advanced understanding of complex doctrinal systems, they have left relatively unexplored the everyday lives of ordinary monks, who constitute the majority of monastic populations. By focusing on these ordinary monks, or *trapa*, the present study seeks to depart from this dominant trend.

The limited ethnographic studies that have examined “ordinary” monastic life in Tibetan societies have often emphasised relationships between monks and lay householders,

particularly in terms of economic exchange or symbolic and structural dichotomies. However, such approaches frequently assume that monastic life directly reflects institutionalised Buddhist values or formalised cultural structures. In contrast, this study focuses exclusively on the monastery as a social world in itself. It seeks to directly investigate the socialisation of novice monks through their life histories, daily routines, and the structural, organisational, and cultural dimensions of the monastic environment that shape their experiences. By treating the monastery as a kind of natural social laboratory, the study aims to understand monks not through comparison with lay society or doctrinal assumptions, but through their own narratives, lived practices, and processes of internalising norms, values, and beliefs.

In addition to its qualitative research design, this study also departs from the conventional reliance on key informants and limited non-participant observation by incorporating a broader and more systematic sampling strategy aimed at capturing the socialisation experiences of novice monks residing within monasteries. The methodological approach includes online survey interviews, narrative-based life histories, non-participant observation, and case studies. Survey interviews were employed to gather qualitative data on life histories, offering a general overview of the composition of monastic communities. Life history interviews were designed to elicit narratives of significant life events and reflections on religious ideas from the perspective of novice monks themselves. Non-participant observation, conducted through online meeting platforms, provided insights into the daily rhythms of monastic life and the functioning of the social environment. Finally, case studies were used to document the complete daily routines of selected key informants, thereby addressing gaps left by less formal observational methods. Together, these methods aim to present a comprehensive and multi-dimensional understanding of monastic life in Tawang and the forces that shape it. A secondary objective of this study is to offer an insider perspective on an institution that is often misunderstood and insufficiently documented. The life histories of novice monks will deepen understanding of how mass monasticism functions, the diverse backgrounds from which novice monks originate, the multiple trajectories of monastic careers, and the articulation of religious ideas in the monks' own voices. Online non-participant observation—focused exclusively within the monasteries and informed by an awareness of their internal social structures—will illuminate the everyday functioning of smaller monastic institutions. Although less grand than the more prominent monasteries of Tibetan Buddhism, these smaller institutions have historically been the most widespread across the Tibetan cultural landscape. By bringing attention to the often-overlooked, mundane dimensions of an intensely religious way of life, this study seeks to portray monks not as idealised or homogenous figures, but as individuals embedded in a lived and dynamic social reality.

Tawang: The Land

Tawang is a historically and culturally significant town that serves as the administrative headquarters of Tawang district in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Before its establishment as a full-fledged district on 5 October 1984, Tawang functioned as a sub-division of West Kameng District. Strategically located in the westernmost part of the state, the district spans an area of approximately 2,172 square kilometres and occupies a crucial position along India's northeastern frontier. Geographically, Tawang is bounded by Tibet to the north and

Bhutan to the south-west, while the formidable Sela Range separates it from the West Kameng district in the east. Due to its proximity to the international boundary, the region also lies near the Line of Actual Control, making it geopolitically sensitive. China continues to claim Tawang as part of the Tibet Autonomous Region, adding to its strategic importance.

Situated approximately 448 kilometres north-west of Itanagar, the state capital, Tawang stands at an elevation of about 3,048 meters (10,000 feet) above sea level. The town lies to the north of the Tawang Chu river valley, surrounded by snow-clad mountains and deep valleys that enhance its scenic grandeur. It is located roughly 555 kilometres from Guwahati and about 320 kilometres from Tezpur, making access challenging yet visually rewarding. The district's topography is marked by an unbroken chain of mountains and rugged terrain, with altitudes ranging from around 3,500 feet to approximately 22,500 feet. The highest peak in the region is Gorichen Peak, which dominates the landscape with its imposing height and snow-covered slopes. The Sela Pass, situated at an altitude of about 13,714 feet, serves as a vital mountain pass and a symbolic gateway into Tawang. Often covered in snow, it connects the district with the rest of Arunachal Pradesh and plays both a logistical and cultural role in linking communities.

Climatically, Tawang experiences a temperate highland climate. The region is characterised by cool summers and cold winters, with snowfall being common in the winter months. The average annual temperature is approximately 10.3°C, while the district receives an average annual rainfall of about 915 millimetres, most of which occurs during the monsoon season. Winters are relatively dry, contributing to the stark seasonal contrasts that define life in the region. According to the 2011 Census, Tawang has a modest population of 11,202, reflecting its remote location and challenging terrain. The name "Tawang" itself is steeped in legend and spiritual symbolism. It is widely believed to have been derived from the monastery founded in the 17th century by Mera Lama Lodre Gyatso under the guidance of the 5th Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso. The term is composed of two Tibetan words: "Ta," meaning horse, and "Wang," meaning chosen or blessed. According to local legend, the site of the monastery was divinely selected by a wandering horse belonging to the lama. After losing the horse, the lama discovered it peacefully resting atop a hill, which he interpreted as an auspicious sign. Consequently, the monastery was constructed at that very location, and the surrounding settlement came to be known as Tawang, or "the place chosen by the horse." Thus, Tawang emerges not merely as a geographical entity but as a region where landscape, legend, and spirituality converge. Its rugged terrain, strategic location, and deep-rooted cultural traditions together make it a distinctive and significant space within the Himalayan world.

A Brief History of Tawang

Historically, Tawang formed an integral part of the broader Tibetan cultural and political sphere and was inhabited predominantly by the Monpa community, whose social, religious, and linguistic traditions remain deeply intertwined with Tibetan Buddhism. The region gained immense religious prominence with the establishment of Tawang Monastery in 1681 by Mera Lama Lodre Gyatso under the guidance of the 5th Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso. This monastery, one of the largest outside Lhasa, emerged not only as a major centre of learning and

spirituality but also as a key institution of regional authority and cultural integration. Tawang is also historically significant as the birthplace of the 6th Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, further enhancing its sacred status within the Tibetan Buddhist world.

The strategic and political importance of Tawang came to the forefront during the Simla Conference of 1914, where British India and Tibet negotiated a boundary in the eastern Himalayas, resulting in the demarcation known as the McMahon Line. While this agreement was accepted by both Tibet and British authorities, it was not recognised by China, thereby sowing the seeds of a long-standing territorial dispute. For several decades following the conference, administrative control over Tawang remained ambiguous, with Tibetan authorities continuing to exercise influence in the region despite British claims. A decisive shift occurred in 1951 when Bob Khating, acting on behalf of the Government of India, formally established Indian administrative control over Tawang, integrating it into the Indian state structure. This transition marked the end of Tibetan administrative authority in the region and initiated a new phase in its political history.

Tawang again assumed strategic importance during the Sino-Indian War of 1962, when Chinese forces advanced into the region and briefly occupied it. However, following the cessation of hostilities, China withdrew its troops, and Tawang was restored to Indian administration. Despite this withdrawal, China continues to assert territorial claims over Tawang as part of the Tibet Autonomous Region, making it a persistent point of contention in India–China relations.

Thus, the history of Tawang reflects a complex interplay of religion, culture, and geopolitics—where sacred landscapes, monastic institutions, and strategic boundaries converge to shape its past and present.

People of Tawang: The Monpas

The Monpas constitute the predominant indigenous community of Tawang and its adjoining regions, forming the cultural backbone of this Himalayan landscape. Ethnically belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group, the Monpas share deep historical, linguistic, and religious affinities with neighbouring regions such as Tibet and Bhutan. Their identity is shaped by a rich synthesis of indigenous traditions and Tibetan Buddhist influences, making them one of the most culturally distinctive communities in Northeast India. Traditionally, Monpa society is organised around strong kinship networks, clan affiliations, and localised systems of governance. Village life is regulated through traditional councils known as *mangma*, which are typically headed by a village elder or *gaon burha*. These institutions play a crucial role in maintaining social order, resolving disputes, and preserving customary laws. Alongside these secular structures, religious institutions—particularly monasteries—occupy a central position, guiding not only spiritual practices but also social norms and ethical conduct.

The economic life of the Monpas is closely intertwined with their natural environment. Agriculture and pastoralism form the backbone of their livelihood, with crops such as barley, maize, millet, and buckwheat cultivated on terraced fields adapted to the mountainous terrain. Animal husbandry—especially the rearing of yaks, sheep, and cattle—is equally significant, particularly in high-altitude areas. In addition, the Monpas are renowned for their rich tradition

of handicrafts, including weaving, wood carving, bamboo work, and *thangka* painting, which reflect both aesthetic sensibilities and religious devotion. Festivals form an integral part of Monpa cultural life, reinforcing communal bonds and religious values. Celebrations such as Losar, marking the Tibetan New Year, and Torgya, a major monastic festival held at Tawang Monastery, are observed with elaborate rituals, masked dances, and communal participation. These festivals not only serve religious purposes but also function as important occasions for social cohesion and cultural transmission. Social life among the Monpas is governed by deeply rooted customary norms concerning marriage, inheritance, and community relations. While monogamy is the dominant practice, variations such as fraternal polyandry have historically existed in certain pastoral contexts. Family structures often emphasise collective living, and strong bonds of mutual support are maintained within and across households. Inheritance patterns traditionally favour male lineage, though social roles within the household remain complementary and interdependent. Monpa society places a high value on religion, education, and collective well-being. Monasteries are not merely centres of worship but pivotal institutions that shape social organisation, regulate moral conduct, and sustain economic and cultural life. It is customary in many families for at least one son to join the monastery, reinforcing the close relationship between household and monastic spheres. Through rituals, teachings, and everyday interactions, monasteries contribute significantly to the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge. In essence, the Monpas of Tawang embody a way of life that is deeply attuned to nature, community, and spirituality. Their social structure, economic practices, and cultural traditions together reflect a resilient and cohesive society in which religion and daily life are inseparably intertwined.

Religion in Tawang

Religion constitutes the very foundation of life in Tawang, shaping not only spiritual beliefs but also social organisation, cultural practices, and everyday routines. The Monpa community, which forms the majority population of the region, primarily adheres to the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, introduced in the 17th century through the influence of monastic institutions and religious teachers. At the same time, elements of the indigenous Bon tradition continue to coexist with Buddhist practices, resulting in a layered and syncretic religious landscape where pre-Buddhist beliefs and rituals are woven into the fabric of Buddhist life.

At the heart of this religious world stands Tawang Monastery, the most prominent spiritual and cultural institution in the region. Established in the 17th century, the monastery functions not only as a centre of religious learning but also as a key institution governing social and moral life. It houses hundreds of monks who are engaged in the rigorous study of Buddhist scriptures, philosophical training, and ritual practices. The monastery also serves as a repository of sacred texts, art, and traditions, thereby preserving the intellectual and cultural heritage of Tibetan Buddhism. Monastic life in Tawang is sustained through a deeply rooted system of mutual dependence between the monastery and the lay community. Local households contribute voluntarily in the form of grains, butter, firewood, and other essentials, reflecting a reciprocal relationship grounded in faith and social obligation. These contributions are not merely economic transactions but are understood as acts of devotion that ensure spiritual merit and communal well-being. In return, monks perform rituals, prayers, and ceremonies believed to

safeguard the health, prosperity, and harmony of the community. The religious landscape of Tawang is visibly marked by sacred symbols and structures that reinforce spiritual consciousness in everyday life. Prayer flags inscribed with the sacred mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum” flutter across hills and rooftops, symbolising the spread of compassion and blessings through the wind. Chortens (stupas), mani walls, and stone shrines are commonly found along pathways and village boundaries, embedding religious meaning within the physical environment. These elements transform the landscape into a living sacred space, where spirituality is constantly encountered and experienced. Festivals and ritual practices further illustrate the centrality of religion in Monpa life. Events such as Choskar involve ceremonial processions in which monks and villagers circumambulate agricultural fields carrying sacred texts and chanting prayers. These rituals are performed to invoke divine protection, ensure agricultural fertility, and maintain harmony between humans and nature. Such practices highlight the integration of religion with ecological consciousness and subsistence life. The religious sphere in Tawang also includes nunneries, locally known as *Ani Gompas*, where women voluntarily pursue a monastic life dedicated to spiritual discipline and service. Although there is no strict obligation, social customs often encourage at least one male child in a family to join the monastery, thereby reinforcing the close interconnection between family structures and religious institutions.

In sum, Tawang represents a vibrant synthesis of geography, history, culture, and religion. Here, Tibetan Buddhist traditions are not confined to institutional spaces but permeate the rhythms of daily life, shaping identities, relationships, and worldviews. Religion, in this context, is not merely a system of belief but a lived and embodied practice that sustains both individual and collective existence.

Buddhist Monasticism in Tawang

Archaeological and art historical evidence suggests that Buddhism was present in Tawang long before the consolidation of Tibetan cultural influence, possibly as early as the 2nd century A.D., during the height of the Kushan Empire and its Greco-Buddhist cultural milieu. However, the monastic institutions that exist in Tawang today are primarily the result of later processes of Tibetanization that began around the 10th century, when waves of Buddhist revival and translation movements reshaped the religious landscape of the Himalayan region. During this period, influential Buddhist teachers and translators played a key role in establishing distinctly Tibetan forms of monastic organisation and practice.

Tawang was geographically well-positioned to participate in a wider Buddhist renaissance that drew upon the flourishing Mahayana traditions of north-western India, including regions such as Kashmir and the Karakoram. Over time, however, the centre of Buddhist authority shifted toward central Tibet, especially as the decline of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent following medieval invasions weakened earlier centres of learning. Consequently, monastic institutions in Tawang became increasingly dependent on central Tibetan establishments. From approximately the 12th to 15th centuries onward, monasteries in Tawang were often founded as affiliates or “satellites” of larger Tibetan monastic centres. It was during this period that the practice of sending monks from Tawang to Tibet for advanced monastic education became

institutionalised—a tradition that, in modified form, continues even today. At present, there are approximately twenty-five active Buddhist monasteries (*gompas*) in Tawang, many of which are affiliated with larger monastic universities. Historically, young monks would travel to central Tibetan institutions for extensive training, often spending years immersed in rigorous scholastic and ritual education. Following the 1959 Lhasa Uprising and the subsequent displacement of Tibetan monastic institutions, many of these centres were re-established in exile in India. Today, novice monks from Tawang often pursue higher monastic education in these reconstituted institutions before returning to serve their home monasteries, thus continuing a long-standing pattern of religious exchange and intellectual circulation.

A defining feature of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism is what Melvyn Goldstein has described as “mass monasticism,” wherein the prestige of a society is partly measured by the number of monks it sustains. In this system, boys are often recruited into monasteries at a very young age, ensuring that their primary socialisation occurs within the monastic environment. Families may send a son to the monastery for a variety of reasons, including religious merit, social expectation, and economic considerations. The act is often understood as spiritually beneficial for both the child and the household. The relationship between monasteries and lay communities in Tawang is deeply interdependent. Monasteries traditionally possess land, livestock, and other resources, which are often managed in collaboration with local communities. In return, lay households provide material support—such as food, labour, and donations—while monks perform rituals, prayers, and ceremonies that sustain the spiritual well-being of the community. This reciprocal arrangement ensures the continuity of both religious and social life. At the apex of the monastic hierarchy stands the *Rinpoche* (literally “precious one”), often regarded as the reincarnation of a previous spiritual master within a lineage of *tulkus*. Among the most prominent figures in this tradition is the Dalai Lama, who represents both spiritual authority and institutional continuity within the Gelugpa order. Monasteries may function as independent units or as branches of larger institutions under the guidance of such figures.

Monastic life in Tawang is highly structured and begins with ordination. The process typically starts with a preliminary stage similar to *upāsaka* (lay devotee), followed by *getsul* (novice monk), and ultimately *gelong* (fully ordained monk), each involving progressively stricter vows and responsibilities. These stages mark a gradual transition from lay life to full monastic commitment, encompassing discipline, education, and ritual participation. In addition to spiritual pursuits, monasteries maintain a complex internal administrative structure. Senior monks occupy positions such as abbot (*khenpo*), ritual leader (*umdzad*), and disciplinary officer (*geskos*), while junior monks undertake various supportive and managerial roles. These responsibilities are typically rotational, ensuring that monks participate in the collective functioning of the institution. Ritual practices form the core of monastic life and are integral to both monastic discipline and community engagement. Monks perform a wide range of rituals, including daily prayers, calendrical ceremonies, and life-cycle rituals for the lay community. These may range from small household blessings to elaborate death rites and large-scale communal festivals. Rituals often involve chanting from sacred texts, accompanied by traditional instruments such as cymbals, drums, and horns, creating a rich sensory and symbolic

experience. Monastic rituals in Tawang can be broadly categorised into three types: village rituals, monastery rituals, and broader community festivals. Village rituals include household ceremonies and healing practices performed at the request of laypersons. Monastery rituals encompass daily prayers, confession ceremonies, and observances tied to the religious calendar. Larger community events include annual festivals, which draw widespread participation and reinforce collective identity. Among these, annual monastic festivals hold particular significance, serving as occasions for religious merit, social gathering, and cultural presentation. These festivals, often featuring masked dances and elaborate ritual performances, attract participants from across the region and reaffirm the central role of monasteries in public life.

The Gelugpa Order

The monastic institutions of Tawang predominantly belong to the Gelugpa order of Tibetan Buddhism, founded in the 15th century by Tsongkhapa. This order represents a reformist movement that emphasised strict monastic discipline, scholastic rigour, and a systematic approach to spiritual development. While all major Tibetan Buddhist traditions share a common doctrinal foundation rooted in Mahayana philosophy, the Gelugpa school places particular emphasis on the *Madhyamaka* philosophical tradition, which explores the nature of reality as dependent and conceptually constructed. It also stresses the *Lamrim* (stages of the path) approach, outlining a gradual and disciplined progression toward enlightenment. What distinguishes the Gelugpa order most clearly is its focus on intellectual training and debate as pathways to realisation. The ideal religious figure within this tradition is not only a meditator but also a scholar. Monks who complete extensive training in Buddhist philosophy may be awarded the title of *Geshe*, equivalent to a doctoral-level degree in Buddhist studies. However, it is important to note that such advanced scholarship is limited to a minority, while most monks engage primarily with foundational teachings and ritual practices.

Review of Literature

The existing body of scholarship on Tibetan Buddhist monasticism reveals both its richness and its limitations, particularly in relation to the lived experiences of children and novice monks. Despite the absence of a dedicated monograph focusing specifically on childhood within monastic institutions, a wide range of classical and contemporary studies provide important conceptual, historical, and ethnographic insights that frame this research. Tibetan Buddhism, as a civilizational and religious system, extends beyond Tibet into a vast cultural sphere encompassing regions of India, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, and diasporic communities across Europe and North America, with monastic institutions functioning as the central loci of doctrinal authority, ritual practice, and social organisation. Foundational works by L. Austin Waddell and Charles Bell laid the groundwork for the academic study of Tibetan monasticism by emphasising institutional structures, hierarchy, ritual systems, and political influence, while later scholars such as R. A. Stein and Giuseppe Tucci expanded these discussions to include philosophical traditions, liturgical practices, and the broader socio-cultural milieu. More nuanced theoretical interventions emerged in the work of Geoffrey Samuel, who conceptualised Tibetan religiosity through a tripartite framework of bodhi (enlightenment-

oriented), karma (merit and rebirth-oriented), and pragmatic (ritual and worldly concerns) orientations, thereby situating monastic life within a dynamic spectrum of religious practice rather than a monolithic structure. At the same time, Samuel's distinction between "clerical" and "shamanic" Buddhism—drawing on Max Weber—highlights the tension between scholastic, discipline-oriented monasticism and ritualistic, charismatic practices, with the Gelugpa order exemplifying the former. Ethnographic studies from regions such as Ladakh further complicate this picture by foregrounding the intimate relationship between monasteries and lay communities; scholars like Martin Mills demonstrate how monasteries function not merely as isolated religious institutions but as active agents mediating village life, ritual practice, and local cosmologies, often integrating indigenous beliefs into formal Buddhist frameworks. The concept of "mass monasticism," developed by Melvyn Goldstein and Tsering, underscores the demographic and social significance of monastic populations, particularly the early recruitment of children into monastic life, often driven by familial decision-making, economic considerations, and the pursuit of karmic merit. However, this model has been critiqued for overemphasising doctrinal internalisation while underestimating the role of structural and environmental factors in shaping monastic lifestyles. Parallel debates emerge in psychological and symbolic interpretations of monasticism, where scholars such as Sherry Ortner and Robert Paul frame monastic life as a counter-cultural alternative to lay society, emphasising ideals of renunciation, celibacy, and autonomy, while others challenge this binary by highlighting the continuity and transformation of social relations within monastic contexts. Ritual theories, particularly Arnold van Gennep's tripartite model of initiation—pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal—along with Victor Turner's emphasis on the enduring liminality of monastic existence, provide valuable frameworks for understanding the process of becoming a monk as both a social and symbolic transformation. Nevertheless, a critical gap persists in the literature: while institutional structures, philosophical doctrines, and ritual systems have been extensively documented, the everyday lives, subjective experiences, and personal narratives of ordinary monks—particularly children—remain underexplored. Existing ethnographies and autobiographical accounts, though insightful, often focus on elite monks, reincarnate lamas, or exceptional cases, thereby limiting their applicability to broader monastic populations. Consequently, this study positions itself within this lacuna, seeking to move beyond structural and symbolic analyses to foreground the lived realities of monastic childhood and to explore how institutional norms, cultural expectations, and individual experiences intersect within the everyday life of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.

Rationale

Children are omnipresent in every society; they are shaped by culture, and in turn, they shape its future. Yet, despite their centrality to the continuity and transformation of social life, children have remained significantly underrepresented in anthropological inquiry. This gap is particularly striking given that anthropology is not only concerned with understanding cultures as they exist in the present but also with tracing their trajectories into the future—a future embodied by children themselves. Recognising this lacuna, the present study foregrounds children as active cultural agents, rather than passive recipients, by focusing specifically on novice monks within Tibetan Buddhist monastic settings. The decision to center this research

on child-monks arises from a combined interest in Tibetan Buddhism, the dynamics of cultural preservation, and the sociology of childhood.

Within the Tibetan cultural context, children occupy a uniquely significant position, especially in the preservation and transmission of religious and cultural identity. This importance has been further intensified by historical and political developments following the incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic of China. The resulting socio-political transformations, including restrictions on religious practices, linguistic erosion, and the destruction of monastic institutions, have compelled many Tibetans to seek refuge in countries such as India. In exile, Tibetan communities have actively reconstructed their religious and educational institutions, establishing monasteries and schools that function as sites of cultural resilience. Central to this process is the role of children, who are often sent to institutions such as monasteries or Tibetan educational centres to ensure the continuity of language, religious knowledge, and cultural traditions. This practice reflects a conscious cultural strategy wherein children are envisioned as custodians of collective identity. The words attributed to the Dalai Lama, as conveyed in dialogue with Jawaharlal Nehru, poignantly capture this ethos: the survival of the Tibetan cause lies not merely in political advocacy but in the education and upbringing of its younger generations. Such perspectives underscore the urgency of examining children's lived experiences within these institutions. Despite the presence of extensive literature on Tibetan monasticism, existing scholarship has largely focused on elite figures such as tulkus and rinpoches, or on institutional structures and doctrinal frameworks, leaving the everyday realities of novice monks relatively unexplored.

This study is further motivated by the gap between external perceptions and internal realities of monastic childhood. Common reactions from outside observers—often rooted in modern, Westernised notions of childhood—tend to problematize the early entry of children into monastic life, emphasising concerns about separation from family, discipline, and rigorous study. However, such perspectives may overlook the cultural, social, and spiritual contexts within which these practices are embedded. Rather than imposing external judgments, this research seeks to privilege the voices and experiences of the children themselves. It asks critical questions: How do novice monks perceive their own lives? Do they experience loss, or do they find alternative forms of belonging within the monastic community? How do they understand their roles in relation to family, religion, and culture? And to what extent do they exercise agency in shaping their own trajectories? By addressing these questions, this dissertation aims not to generalise across all Tibetan monastic contexts but to offer a grounded, context-specific understanding of the socialisation processes of novice monks. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced anthropology of childhood, religion, and cultural continuity. Ultimately, this study aspires to open new avenues for future research on monastic education and the lived experiences of children within religious institutions, thereby bridging an important gap in existing scholarship.

Socialisation of Novice Monks

In Tibetan Buddhism, the process of becoming a monk is deeply embedded within the framework of the Three Jewels, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—of which the Sangha, the

community of practitioners, is of particular relevance to this study. The Sangha encompasses not only fully ordained monks (bhikkus) and nuns (bhikkunis) but also lay practitioners, thereby forming an interconnected social and religious system. This integrative nature allows children born into lay families to transition into monastic life, reflecting a fluid yet structured movement within the religious order. Typically, a child entering a monastery is first recognised as a novice (genen), marking the initial stage of monastic socialisation. This stage may or may not involve formal initiation but signifies acceptance into the monastic environment and the study of Dharma. The ritual of “wandering forth” (pravrajya), as described in Buddhist texts, symbolises this transition through the adoption of monastic robes, the alms bowl, and adherence to the ten basic precepts.

As novices progress, they enter successive stages such as drapa and rigchun, each representing increasing levels of discipline, responsibility, and integration into monastic life. During the drapa stage, the child monk undergoes a period of service and learning, often performing humble tasks under the guidance of a teacher, thereby internalising the values of humility, obedience, and discipline. This phase is crucial in shaping the novice’s adaptation to monastic routines and hierarchies. Advancement to the rigchun stage brings greater autonomy, including improved living conditions and deeper engagement with religious study, though full participation in ritual life remains restricted until higher ordination. Ultimately, the attainment of the gelong stage signifies full ordination, requiring the observance of 253 vows as prescribed in the Vinaya, and marks the individual’s complete integration into the monastic community. This progression is not merely institutional but deeply social, involving gradual incorporation into the moral, spiritual, and communal fabric of monastic life.

The age at which children enter monasteries has traditionally been between seven and eight years, a period considered ideal for early moral and spiritual conditioning. However, political interventions—particularly in Tibet under the governance of the People’s Republic of China—have attempted to regulate and restrict this practice, notably by raising the minimum age of entry. Such policies have been met with resistance from Tibetan communities, who view early monastic education as essential for cultivating disciplined scholars and preserving religious traditions. While early entry is often valorised, even figures like the Dalai Lama have expressed concerns regarding the broader socio-economic implications of large monastic populations, advocating for a balance between religious and secular education.

The socialisation of novice monks is also shaped by familial, cultural, and institutional factors, despite assumptions that sending a child to a monastery indicates weak familial bonds. Tibetan Buddhist culture emphasises deep respect and obligation within the parent-child relationship. Decisions regarding monastic entry are often made collectively by families, motivated by a combination of religious merit, economic considerations, and cultural values. In many cases, children are sent to monasteries not only to pursue spiritual development but also to gain access to education, particularly in contexts where monastic institutions historically served as the primary centre of learning. Rituals marking different stages of childhood—from birth ceremonies to first hair-cutting rites—underscore the integration of religious practices into early life, reinforcing a worldview in which individual identity is shaped by karma, rebirth, and spiritual continuity.

Multiple motivations underpin the entry of children into monastic life. Traditional systems such as the Tsung gral (monk-tax) institutionalised the expectation that families would contribute a child to the monastery, thereby reinforcing the social and religious fabric of Tibetan society. Religious motivations remain central, including beliefs in karmic merit, gratitude for divine intervention, or guidance from lamas. In some cases, children themselves express a desire to join monastic life, reflecting an emerging religious consciousness shaped by both cultural exposure and personal interpretation. Psychological perspectives suggest that such consciousness develops through socialisation, language acquisition, and existential questioning, particularly around themes of life and death. Economic factors also play a significant role, as monasteries often provide stability, education, and sustenance for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or those without familial support.

Socio-cultural dynamics further influence this process, with monasteries historically functioning as avenues for social mobility, education, and even refuge from restrictive social structures. For some, particularly girls entering nunneries, monastic life represents an alternative to marriage and domestic obligations, offering a degree of autonomy otherwise unavailable. Additionally, ideological motivations have gained prominence in the modern context, especially following the political upheavals in Tibet. The destruction of monasteries and suppression of religious practices have transformed monastic entry into an act of cultural preservation and resistance. By sending children to monasteries, families actively participate in safeguarding their religious heritage and identity.

Overall, the socialisation of novice monks is a complex, multi-layered process that cannot be reduced to a single explanatory framework. It involves the interplay of religious doctrine, institutional structures, familial decisions, economic realities, and political contexts. Rather than viewing novice monks as passive recipients of monastic discipline, it is essential to recognize them as active participants in a dynamic process of cultural reproduction and transformation, where individual experiences intersect with broader historical and social forces.

Research Methodology

In empirical research, it is essential to clearly outline the methods adopted for data collection and analysis, along with the challenges encountered during the research process, and this chapter presents such a framework for the present study. The statement of the problem emerged from the researcher's dual experience as a temporary monk and as a teacher with over five years of teaching experience, through which he became aware of various issues affecting youth, particularly in relation to familial relationships, peer interactions, and the influence of modern urban life; interactions with students in Buddhist Sunday schools and general educational institutions revealed concerns such as family conflicts and substance abuse, while parents frequently approached the researcher for guidance due to the moral authority associated with monks in Thai society, where monks are revered as embodiments of ethical values and spiritual wisdom. This context led to the recognition of a perceived moral vacuum among young people and the inadequacy of the formal education system in addressing moral socialisation, prompting key research questions regarding the role of monks in education, the effectiveness

of moral instruction by teachers versus monks, and the attitudes of administrators, teachers, and students towards integrating religious and modern educational systems. Accordingly, the study aims to examine the relationship between religion and education in Thailand, review the role of Buddhist monks in education historically and contemporarily, analyse the traditional educational system influenced by Buddhism, and explore theoretical perspectives on socialisation. The research was conducted in Nonthaburi province, where four government high secondary schools affiliated with the Department of General Education were purposively selected from a larger population due to their engagement with monks in moral instruction, and the sample included 5 administrators, 45 teachers, and 200 students, totalling 250 respondents, considered representative of the broader population. Data collection involved both documentary and fieldwork methods, with extensive consultation of books, research articles, dissertations, and official records from major academic institutions and government bodies, alongside the administration of two structured questionnaires—one for teachers and administrators and another for students—carefully designed, pilot-tested, and translated into Thai to ensure clarity and accessibility; the teachers' questionnaire contained 20 questions, while the students' questionnaire included 28 questions aimed at assessing perceptions and attitudes towards the role of monks in moral education. In addition, participant observation enriched the study, as the researcher's prior experience as both a teacher and a monk provided valuable insider insights while maintaining objectivity in analysis, which primarily emphasised qualitative interpretation to preserve the depth of responses rather than relying heavily on statistical representation. The study, however, is limited to schools where monks are involved in teaching and does not account for institutions where such practices are absent; as an attitudinal study, it is subject to inherent limitations of perception-based research. Several challenges were encountered, including resistance and skepticism from some school administrators unfamiliar with social science research, reluctance among students to express critical views about monks due to cultural norms, difficulties in accessing official documents because of bureaucratic barriers, and the demanding task of translating Thai materials into English; nevertheless, the researcher completed the study with the cooperation of many respondents and expresses sincere gratitude for their contributions.

Roles and Obligations of a Bhikkhu

The roles and obligations of a *bhikkhu* (monk) are primarily governed by the Vinaya Pitaka, which outlines proper conduct, discipline, and ethical living. Central to monastic life are the Four Requisites—food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, which must be used mindfully and without attachment, solely for sustaining life and supporting spiritual practice. A *bhikkhu* is expected to live simply, relying on alms (*piṇḍapāta*) offered voluntarily by laypeople rather than actively begging, reflecting the interdependence between the monastic community (*sangha*) and society. Possessions are minimal, typically limited to essentials such as robes, an alms bowl, a razor, and a needle. The monk must avoid luxury, accumulation of wealth, and especially the acceptance of money, as these can lead to moral decline. Ethical discipline is strict: monks must refrain from intoxicants, improper livelihood, entertainment, and inappropriate social interactions. They are also prohibited from engaging in deceit, trade, or activities that distract from the spiritual path. Teaching the *Dhamma* is a key responsibility, but

it must be done respectfully and only when invited, ensuring that both teacher and listener uphold the dignity of the teaching. A bhikkhu's conduct—both inside and outside the monastery—serves as a living example of Buddhist values, emphasising restraint, humility, and mindfulness. Ultimately, the monastic life is dedicated to the realisation of *Nibbāna*, and all roles and obligations are directed toward this spiritual goal while maintaining the faith and respect of the lay community.

Data Summary and Analysis

The questionnaires were designed to generate qualitative data on monastic demographics, personal histories, and social status, and were administered to 30 *sramaneras* (novice monks) from Spituk Monastery, representing the entire population under study. Respondents were encouraged to elaborate on their answers, providing valuable contextual insights, particularly as they were visiting their home monastery during a break from studies at a major monastic university in South India; the presence of a *machin* (lay caretaker and cook) further enriched understanding of the monastery's social environment. The study examined age distribution, ordination status, and occupational roles to analyse social stratification, revealing a hierarchy based on age and monastic rank, where younger monks (aged 8–18) showed deference to seniors while pursuing both monastic and formal education in Tibetan and Pali, with limited proficiency in Hindi or English. Occupational structures reflected hierarchical organisation, with categories such as *getsuls*, *gelongs*, and retired monks, alongside administrative and teaching roles, although many monks remained primarily engaged in study and spiritual practice. Personal background data indicated that most respondents were locally born and entered monastic life due to a mix of familial influence, religious devotion, and the pursuit of discipline, maintaining limited but meaningful contact with their families. Entry into monkhood typically occurred between ages 8 and 12, aligning with the notion of “mass monasticism,” and was shaped by both parental decisions and individual inclination. Motivations included spiritual growth, alleviating suffering, and adherence to religious traditions, with respondents viewing monastic life as a path of renunciation, discipline, and inner peace. Educationally, all participants were trained within the Gelug tradition, combining scriptural study, ritual practice, and daily communal responsibilities, while expressing aspirations for higher monastic education. However, the study is limited by its qualitative focus, restricted institutional scope, and reliance on self-reported data. Additionally, the researcher encountered difficulties such as participant scepticism due to the relatively weak tradition of social science research, reluctance among students to express critical views owing to cultural reverence for monastic institutions, challenges in accessing official documents due to bureaucratic barriers, and the demanding task of translating materials from Thai into English.

Future Research Potential

This study opens multiple avenues for future research on monastic education, socialisation, and institutional transformation within Tibetan Buddhist contexts. One important area that requires deeper investigation is the ongoing integration of formal, state-style education within monasteries. The introduction of structured curricula, modern subjects, and institutional schooling alongside traditional religious training marks a significant shift from the earlier

guru–disciple (pupil–tutor) model. Future studies could examine how this hybrid system shapes the intellectual, moral, and social development of *sramaneras*, and whether it alters their commitment to monastic ideals, disciplinary practices, and spiritual aspirations.

Another crucial dimension is the increasing mobility of monks across institutions, particularly the trend of attending monastic universities located in different regions of India. This mobility not only exposes monks to diverse pedagogical systems and interpretations of Buddhist philosophy but also situates them within broader transregional and even global religious networks. Research could explore how such exposure influence's identity formation, doctrinal understanding, and the relationship between local monastic traditions and centralised scholastic institutions. It would also be valuable to examine whether this trend contributes to the standardisation or homogenisation of monastic education, potentially reducing regional diversity. Comparative studies across different monasteries—ranging from highly institutionalised centres to smaller, more isolated monastic communities—would further enrich understanding of variation within Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. Such research could analyse differences in organisational structures, daily routines, authority systems, and degrees of engagement with lay society. In particular, the extent to which monasteries interact with local communities, participate in social service, or remain relatively secluded could significantly influence patterns of socialisation and worldview formation among monks.

Additionally, future research should pay attention to the social environments within monasteries, including peer relationships, hierarchical dynamics, and the role of senior monks as mentors and disciplinarians. Ethnographic approaches focusing on everyday life, such as routines, informal interactions, and lived experiences, would provide deeper insight into how monastic values are internalised and practised. There is also scope to explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of monastic life, especially for young entrants who join at an early age and experience limited contact with their families. The relationship between monastic and lay society is another important area for further exploration. With increasing globalisation, tourism, and exposure to modern communication technologies, monasteries are no longer entirely isolated. Future studies could investigate how these external influences reshape monastic practices, expectations, and modes of engagement with the wider world. This includes examining whether monks take on new roles as educators, cultural ambassadors, or social actors beyond strictly dharmic functions.

Finally, there is a need for longitudinal and comparative research that tracks changes over time and across regions. Such studies could help identify broader trends in Tibetan Buddhist monasticism, including shifts towards institutional centralisation, changing recruitment patterns, and evolving definitions of monkhood. By combining qualitative methods with selective quantitative approaches, future research can offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of monastic life as a dynamic and adaptive social institution.

Conclusion

This study clearly demonstrates that monastic life, although ideally oriented toward spiritual transcendence and detachment from worldly concerns, remains deeply embedded within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Monasteries do not function as isolated or

purely spiritual domains; rather, they operate as dynamic social spaces that construct and sustain alternative cultural systems. Within these systems, monks are socialised into particular norms, values, hierarchies, and practices that shape their identities, behaviours, and worldviews. Thus, instead of representing a complete withdrawal from society, monastic life reflects a reconfiguration of social existence in which religious ideals are mediated through everyday interactions, institutional structures, and cultural influences.

The findings of this research highlight the central role of the social environment in influencing monastic life. Factors such as age-based hierarchy, ordination status, educational structures, peer relationships, and interactions with teachers and lay communities all contribute significantly to shaping the lived experiences of monks. These elements influence not only their religious practices but also their perceptions of discipline, authority, knowledge, and selfhood. The study also reveals that the process of socialisation within monasteries begins at a very early age and is often shaped by family decisions, thereby linking monastic life closely with broader social and familial structures.

At the same time, the research brings attention to the evolving nature of monastic institutions, particularly in regions like Ladakh. The incorporation of modern education, exposure to external institutions, and gradual engagement with wider social processes indicate that monastic life is not static but adaptive and responsive to changing conditions. These transformations raise important questions about the future of monastic traditions, especially regarding the balance between preserving religious authenticity and accommodating modern influences. By documenting personal narratives, educational trajectories, and daily routines, this study offers an intimate and grounded understanding of the lived realities of Tibetan Buddhist monks—an area that has often been overlooked in favour of doctrinal or philosophical analyses. It contributes to the existing body of knowledge by foregrounding the everyday dimensions of monastic life, including occupational roles, institutional hierarchies, and patterns of interaction within and beyond the monastery. Such insights are particularly valuable for expanding the scope of Tibetan and Ladakhi cultural studies. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of adopting qualitative and ethnographic approaches in the study of religious institutions. By engaging directly with monks and observing their lived experiences, it becomes possible to move beyond abstract representations of monasticism and instead understand it as a complex, socially embedded practice. This approach not only deepens our understanding of monastic socialisation but also opens up new directions for future research on the intersections of religion, culture, and society.

In conclusion, monastic life should be understood not merely as a spiritual pursuit detached from the world, but as a socially situated and culturally constructed way of life. Recognising this complexity allows for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of Tibetan Buddhist monasticism and its continuing relevance in a rapidly changing world.

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To cite this article:

 © 2025 Published by Centre for Peace & Development (CPD), Varanasi

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 Volume 15, Issue 1, 2025



**CENTRE FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPEMENT, VARANASI,
221005**



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India's Humanitarian Assistance as Peacebuilding Strategy in South Asia

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Abstract

Humanitarian assistance has emerged as one of the most significant tools of modern diplomatic practice, especially in places characterised by frequent disasters, political instability, and post-conflict periods. South Asia is one such region where humanitarian crises are prone to overlap with years-long developmental issues and security concerns. The paper will explore India's humanitarian assistance in South Asian states through a peacebuilding lens, arguing that humanitarianism has become a strategic part of Indian development diplomacy rather than a wholly ad hoc or reactive response. The paper will also examine India's humanitarian involvement in seven countries of South Asia, namely, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bhutan, in the context of the growing regional role of India, from post-independence to the present times, using a qualitative and comparative approach. The paper will be based on primary and secondary sources that aim to discuss how humanitarian aid provided by India is leading to peacebuilding outcomes in South Asia, by means of post-crisis stabilisation, trust-building and resilience enhancement. The paper shall also critically analyse the limitations of humanitarian assistance given by India in the region. The paper will contribute to debates on models of peacebuilding and will also highlight the growing role of India in shaping regional peace and stability in South Asia through humanitarian assistance.

Keywords: India, South Asia, Peacebuilding, Humanitarian Assistance.

Introduction

Humanitarian assistance has emerged as a more prominent feature in modern-day diplomacy, especially in places where chronic susceptibility to conflicts, political instability, and natural catastrophes takes place. In the post-Cold War era, the nature of humanitarian assistance is not only considered an emergency response tool to crisis events but has also become a strategic tool by which states attempt to stabilise unstable environments, generate trust and influence regional order.

“Traditionally, humanitarian aid or humanitarian assistance has been defined as a group of activities undertaken by individuals or institutions targeted towards the provision of assistance to individuals and communities afflicted by disasters, conflicts or crises. It aims to save lives, alleviate suffering, and preserve human dignity throughout and following crises and disasters, and to prevent and reinforce preparedness for the occurrence of such an event”.

- Urquhart et al.

Based on the work of Johan Galtung, it is possible to define peacebuilding as a long-term process that seeks to establish social, political, economic, and cultural systems that eliminate the causes of violence and offer peaceful options to conflict, beyond that of immediate ceasefire agreements and humanitarian relief to target direct, structural, and cultural violence. Humanitarian aid, in this context, does not serve just as an emergency response, but it is a source of peacebuilding as long as it helps lessen structural vulnerability, enhance local capacity, and forestall a slip into conflict in post-conflict societies.

The increasing intersection of humanitarian aid with peacebuilding indicates a greater shift in international relations in the sense that non-traditional security threats, including disasters, pandemics, displacement and economic shocks, have started to take over diplomatic priorities as much as traditional threats posed by the military.

“South Asia is one of the most complex arenas in which the evolving role of humanitarian aid can be analysed and examined. The region is characterised by constant interstate tension, internal conflicts and political instability.”

- Bhatia, 2011

South Asia is also one of the most disaster-prone areas of the world, where earthquakes, floods, cyclones, droughts and climate emergencies happen repeatedly with extreme humanitarian impacts. (World Bank, 2012). Meanwhile, some South Asian states, including Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, have experienced long durations of internal conflict or post-conflict transition, which makes a process of peacebuilding and stabilisation a long-term goal, as opposed to a short-term target. In this context, the role of India as a donor of humanitarian aid has grown in size. Once a primary beneficiary of foreign aid over the decades after independence, India has become slowly but surely a regional and extra-regional provider of assistance.

“This shift can be seen particularly in South Asia, where humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations of India, development projects and capacity-building programmes have become key aspects of its engagement with the countries of the region. Policy analyses indicate that more than two-thirds of India’s humanitarian assistance has been directed towards its immediate neighbourhood, underscoring the regional focus of its aid diplomacy.”

- Chakradeo, 2020

The increased humanitarian profile of India is directly connected to the overall foreign policy orientation of the country, specifically with a focus on the Neighbourhood First approach since 2014. Humanitarian assistance is being used as a means of enhancing regional stability, acting as a response to address humanitarian crises in the region and sending a message to its regional neighbours that India is a responsible and responsive neighbour. India has responded to the 2015 Nepal earthquake with a major relief operation, its effort to help Sri Lanka in its economic and humanitarian crises in 2022 & 2025, disaster relief interventions in Bangladesh, emergency water support to the Maldives, and consistent humanitarian interventions in Afghanistan can all illustrate how humanitarian action has embedded into the diplomatic practice of India. It is

against this backdrop that the paper studies the case of India's humanitarian assistance in South Asia in terms of peacebuilding strategy with a view to determining whether the Indian humanitarian intervention can be conceptually analysed not simply as emergency relief but as a strategic tool of post-crisis stabilisation, trust-building and regional peace. In particular, the paper examines how India's humanitarian assistance has overall led to peacebuilding and stabilisation in post-disaster and post-conflict in South Asia, and whether humanitarianism can be conceptualised as a long-term mechanism of regional peacebuilding, as opposed to a transient response to a humanitarian crisis. The paper will focus on South Asia only and will discuss the comparative case studies of all South Asian countries: Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, the Maldives, Pakistan and Bhutan. The paper adopts a qualitative and descriptive methodological approach that uses policy documents, official data, and secondary literature. The paper aims to make contributions to the literature on humanitarian diplomacy and regional security in South Asia.

Disasters, Fragility and the Risk of Internal Conflict

Natural disasters are usually regarded as humanitarian crises that need relief and recovery. Numerous studies, however, demonstrate that disasters may also generate political and social pressures in societies (Reinhardt and Ross, 2019). When a disaster occurs in nations where institutions have already been weak, it can amplify economic strain, damage public infrastructure, and cause additional pressure on governments (Babu, De Pinto and Paul, 2019). In these circumstances, communities might find it difficult to access food, shelter, and employment, thus aggravating dissatisfaction and social tensions (Mustafa and Padli, 2019). Displacement is one more significant aspect. Massive calamities usually drive individuals out of their homes in pursuit of safety and essential amenities (Paul, Galasso and Baker, 2024). Sudden migration may lead to competition for land, employment, and local resources (Drabo and Mbaye, 2011). In instances where governments fail to handle these pressures, there might be an escalation of tensions among groups (Azizurrahman and Elyta, 2020). It is because of this that disaster politics scholars often note that disasters can sometimes lead to political instability or even internal violence, especially in fragile states (Canavan and Ide, 2024).

Simultaneously, disasters do not necessarily always result in conflict. (Caso *et al.*, 2024). A lot is determined by the speed with which relief and recovery operations are carried out. (Garzón-Garnica *et al.*, 2021). The immediate strains caused by disasters can be mitigated when the affected societies are provided with timely humanitarian assistance. (Fazli, 2021). The external humanitarian support may serve to restore the basic services, assist relief efforts, and enhance the capacity of the governments to address crises. (Cahill, 2007). Humanitarian aid in this manner can assist in ensuring that humanitarian crises do not translate into more widespread social or political unrest. This correlation is particularly applicable to South Asia. There are frequent earthquakes, floods, cyclones, and health crises in the region. (Mall *et al.*, 2018). Simultaneously, several countries in the region are still struggling with institutional and economic issues. (Singh and Pradhan, 2022). In these conditions, immediate humanitarian assistance may be a significant aspect of ensuring stability in times of crisis. It is in this context that the humanitarian assistance of India can be discussed not solely as disaster relief but also

as a stabilising intervention to facilitate recovery and limit those pressures that otherwise can lead to instability. This paper focuses on Indian humanitarian aid as a stabilising engagement that functions between disaster response and long-term peacebuilding benefits in South Asia.

Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding: A Linkage

“Humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding are analytically different yet become more interdependent in modern international relations. Humanitarian assistance has long been conceptualised as the delivery of life-saving and urgent aid to disaster- or conflict-stricken populations based on the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.”

- Jobbins, 2013

It has been focusing on ensuring that human suffering is reduced and human dignity preserved instead of undertaking explicit political or strategic aims. Peacebuilding, on the contrary, is a long-term measure of ensuring that violence does not occur again through addressing structural factors that cause conflict, strengthening institutions, and promoting social and political stability. However, recent scholarship questions the strong division that exists between these two domains.

“Humanitarian crises are not periodic events in regions where disasters are constant, where weak governance prevails, or in post-conflict situations. Rather, they are entrenched in historical underdevelopment and in political instability. Humanitarian action that can effectively save lives and mitigate immediate suffering, as is observed by the CCDP Working Paper, provides the minimum conditions under which people will be able to recover and stabilise in the long-term.”

- Rossier, 2011

This observation is highly applicable in the case of South Asia, where humanitarian crises are usually accompanied by political conflicts that are not resolved yet, deficient institutional powers, and chronic socio-economic incompetencies.

Conflict sensitivity is one of the main conceptual links between humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. Although humanitarian assistance is delineated in terms of its normativity of being neutral, it inevitably touches on political and social power dynamics in the conflict-ridden society. These decisions on beneficiaries, localities, and means of assistance distribution might contribute to the reaffirmation of existing inequities or polarities unless handled carefully.

“The universally embraced principle of ‘do no harm’ can be seen as a way of reducing these risks by making sure that the dynamics of conflict are not aggravated by humanitarian interventions.”

- Jobbins, 2013

More sophisticated interpretations of conflict sensitivity have gone a step further in acknowledging that humanitarian action is capable of playing a positive role in peacebuilding under specific circumstances without compromising its fundamental principles. The second key element of this structure is the concept of trust-building, which is the cornerstone of humanitarian effectiveness and peacebuilding. The RSIS research on humanitarian diplomacy points out that shrinking trust among states, non-state actors, and affected communities has led

to a continued limit to humanitarian access, as well as diminished the efficacy of aid provision. The prolonged interaction, negotiation, and nurturing relationship with the pertinent stakeholders, defined as humanitarian diplomacy, becomes one of the very important mechanisms of the restoration of trust and humanitarian space. Confidence-building can also involve the creation of trust that is based on consistent and responsive humanitarian intervention, which will also help create the dialogue and cooperation that are necessary in peacebuilding. (Nanthini, 2024).

This linkage is prominently evident in the Indian strategy of humanitarian assistance in South Asia. In contrast to liberal models of peacebuilding, which are based on political conditionality or externally induced institutional reform, India places humanitarian aid into a larger context of development cooperation and collaboration. According to the literature on humanitarian-peacebuilding convergence, humanitarian action can empower peacebuilding in the best way possible when it enhances national ownership, local capacity, and long-term resilience rather than the replacement of domestic institutions. India has focused on sovereignty, non-conditionality, and continuity, which allows humanitarian aid to operate as an instrument of stabilisation without instilling opposition and notions of external interference. At the same time, the framework identifies distinct conceptual boundaries. The available literature warns that humanitarian action should not be overly integrated with political or military stabilisation agendas because this risks the loss of humanitarian neutrality and the destruction of credibility amongst affected populations. (Pedersen, 2020). The history of integrated peace operations has shown that guidelines that lack clarity between humanitarian effort and armed security measures may limit access and put humanitarian actors at risk. Humanitarian assistance, therefore, plays the best role in peacebuilding when it is non-coercive and is more concerned with human security and not regime outcomes.

Indian humanitarian assistance can be perceived as a multifaceted construct, including both immediate disaster response and context-specific support in the post-conflict or fragile environment, with the noble aim to mitigate the suffering of humans, restore basic services, and facilitate the stabilisation of society. The peacebuilding model adopted by India is broader in its approach. (Meier and Murthy, 2011). Instead of distinguishing between humanitarian relief and development cooperation, India is progressively considering both as one end of a spectrum, and humanitarian aid can serve both as an ethical obligation and a stabilising tool in post-disaster and post-conflict situations.

In such a paradigm, humanitarianism is a confidence-building tool and not an independent moral endeavour. Humanitarian assistance, embodied by quick and observable airlifts, medical aid and disaster relief, develops a sense of trust between India and recipient states, especially in times of extreme vulnerability. As an example, the rapid action of India in response to the catastrophe in Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives has been broadly viewed as helping to build bilateral trust and political goodwill, despite the background of other political sensibilities. The idea of humanitarian aid as a peacebuilding instrument is also supported by the focus of Indian policy on resilience-building. Since 2005, domestic disaster management architecture reforms in India, including the Disaster Management Act and the establishment of the National Disaster Response Force, have helped India to offer technical expertise, training and institutional

backing to neighbouring nations. Such efforts are not just limited to quick relief but are extended to long-term preparedness to minimise vulnerability to future crises, thus fostering long-term peace.

In this paper, an analytic approach is taken, which considers humanitarian assistance as a non-coercive but strategic tool of peacebuilding in the region. It uses the concept of humanitarian diplomacy, under which states use relief and assistance to bring about stabilisation, trust-building and normative influence without the imposition of overt political conditions. In the context of India, humanitarian aid is an extension of its developmental diplomacy and its emerging status as a net security provider in South Asia, notably where non-traditional security threats like disasters and humanitarian crises are concerned. This contextualization of humanitarian aid as a part of the wider peace-building effort allows the paper to go beyond a relief-centric approach. It rather looks at the humanitarian involvement of India and its contribution to regional stability, cooperative security, and post-crisis recovery, and also takes note of the strategic calculation that ultimately determines the state's behaviour.

Based on these perspectives, this research paper follows a conceptual framework of a relational and incremental approach. Humanitarian aid is fundamentally viewed not as a direct instrument of peacebuilding but as a facilitating process that promotes peace by minimising vulnerability, restoring dignity, developing trust and enhancing resilience. Peacebuilding outcomes are perceived as indirect, cumulative and context-specific, as the results that develop over time as a result of long-term and conflict-sensitive humanitarian interaction. This framework has been used to analyse the humanitarian aid of India as a strategic, albeit non-coercive, part of its development diplomacy and regional stabilisation in the South Asian context.

Evolution of India's Humanitarian Assistance in South Asia

The evolution of humanitarian aid provided by India to South Asian states has undergone various phases, which have been influenced by domestic capability, regional relationships, and foreign policy orientation. From the post-independence solidarity-driven development aid to the modern-day institutionalised disaster diplomacy, humanitarian involvement has gradually gained peacebuilding importance. Instead of taking a linear course, this evolution has been a layered development where humanitarianism and strategic considerations have become more intertwined. Throughout these phases, humanitarian assistance has shifted from normative solidarity to a policy of structured stabilisation, trust-building, and conflict prevention as an instrument in India's neighbourhood, which works together with India's Neighbourhood First policy.

Stage I: Post-Independence Solidarity and Developmental Humanitarianism (1947-1964)

During the immediate post-independence era, the humanitarian aid India provided was guided by anti-colonial solidarity and a normative interpretation of solidarity between the newly independent states to develop together. (Singh, 2017). Geographical isolation was the main challenge during this time under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. India reckoned that its neighbours would be exposed to instabilities in case they remained disconnected from the world. (Aryal and Bharti, 2023).

“Hence, humanitarian assistance in this initial phase was concerned about connectivity. It was more of engineering and not emergency relief. India sent military engineers not to wage war, but to bend mountains and open highways in the Himalayas. In this phase, developmental needs were intertwined with humanitarian assistance as opposed to emergency aid.”

- Fuchs and Vadlamannati, 2013

India offered aid to neighbouring countries despite its resource limitations. The assistance was centred around infrastructure development, technical assistance, and institutional assistance to alleviate isolation in the Himalayan and frontier regions. This was aimed at connecting the neighbours, such as Nepal and Bhutan, to the Indian border to maintain the flow of medicine, food, and administrative aid. This period formed the normative principles of Indian humanitarian diplomacy by defining development as a long-term process of peacebuilding. Even without any formal humanitarian principles, an early involvement by India had an understanding that economic deprivation and institutional incompetence may bring political instability in its neighbourhood.

Stage II: Strategic Intervention and Security (1964-1990)

The second phase brought a radical change. India started understanding humanitarian crises in the context of national security as the Cold War intensified and the tension in the regions escalated. The New Delhi leadership understood that a crisis in a neighbouring country, be it civil war or a natural disaster, would easily spill over into India, as refugees or unrest. Therefore, humanitarian aid turned more aggressive and, in some cases, interventionist. This became most apparent in the 1971 crisis in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) when the magnitude of human suffering predisposed India to combine relief efforts with military intervention. (Park, 2016). This approach had solidified by the late 1980s. India even sent its military to provide relief or reestablish order even without the full approval of the neighbour, as in the case of Sri Lanka. (Gunewardene, 2017). Although this "muscular" type of aid was effective in halting short-term violence, in many cases, it left them with fervent political resentment.

Stage III: Transition from Aid Recipient to Regional Humanitarian Actor (1991-2003)

The third phase began with the end of the Cold War and with the opening of the Indian economy in 1991. During this phase, India started moving out of the segment of an aid recipient to an emerging humanitarian player in South Asia. India was starting to drift along its own lines as opposed to the heavy interventions that the past decades had imposed. At this period, humanitarian aid was on the rise more in response to natural calamities, although a more holistic doctrine had not yet developed. This changed the emphasis to cooperation and soft power. It was in this change that India was beginning to cooperate closely with the international community. As an example, in introducing its aid, India liaised with the United States during the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, which could have seemed unrealistic a few years before. Since the Indian economy has expanded, it has started to leverage its market dominance on others, including assisting neighbours like stabilising food prices during shortages. It was a

period of restoration of confidence, showing that India could turn out to be a useful friend instead of a domineering elder brother.

Stage IV: Institutionalisation of HADR and First-Responder Diplomacy (2004-2014)

The fourth phase was marked by the institutionalisation of humanitarian aid as an important element of India's foreign policy. Reforms in domestic disaster management, with the most significant being the Disaster Management Act (2005) and the development of specialised response mechanisms, allowed India to extend its capacity to show the world that the country had the humanitarian capacity to brew potential humanitarian disaster responses beyond its boundaries. (Shanbog and Kevlihan, 2022; Hanspal and Behera, 2024). Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) became a definable policy area and incorporated civilian and military efforts in a coordinated strategy. This was the time when India strengthened its position as a regional first responder, one with rapid mobilisation, logistical presence and engagement that was sovereignty-sensitive. Humanitarian aid was not just restricted to immediate relief; it also included reconstruction aid, resilience-building, and technical aid. Importantly, disaster response gained peacebuilding importance where it facilitated trust-building and engagement even in a politically tense bilateral environment. Humanitarian diplomacy, therefore, played a stabilising role which enhanced the credibility of India in the region without acting coercively. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was a very important tipping point in this change, as it highlighted both the fact that India was increasingly able to offer humanitarian support to people and the fact that the response to disasters needed to be more organised. This step prepared the foundation for the institutionalisation of humanitarian aid in the following years.

Stage V: Integrated Humanitarianism and Structural Resilience (2014-Present)

This phase is linked with the transformation of humanitarian aid into the wider context of Neighbourhood First diplomacy, which is built on comprehensive support and economic sustainability. The scope of humanitarian assistance has been extended from natural disasters to health security, economic stabilization, and climate resilience since 2014. This trend was highly pronounced in the case of the 2015 Nepal earthquake (Operation Maitri) and the COVID-19 pandemic, where India implemented the concept of health as a public good through its initiative of Vaccine Maitri. Also, the Sri Lankan 2022 economic crisis implemented a model of financial humanitarianism, in which India has been availing necessary credit facilities and commodity aid to prevent the collapse of the state. In the present day, the view of engagement has grown into structural humanitarianism that pays attention to long-term initiatives, such as disaster-resilient infrastructure and digital connectivity, and views the economic and ecological soundness of the neighbourhood as linked to the national security of India. India has also contributed to this change through new policies and institutional changes in its disaster response system. The international humanitarian actions and disaster relief activities in India are currently guided by the Ten-Point Agenda on Disaster Risk Reduction by the Prime Minister, which specifically focuses on the facet of enhancing coordination in international disaster response. Moreover, in October 2024, the National Disaster Management Authority issued International HADR Guidelines to offer a more precise guide to disaster response

abroad. These guidelines emphasise respect for the sovereignty of the affected states, the transparency of the humanitarian operations, and compliance with the international humanitarian principles.

Throughout these phases, the humanitarian aid in South Asia has developed into a systematic policy of peacebuilding combining humanitarian aid, development cooperation and regional stabilisation. India has evolved its humanitarian practices to suit the new regional realities, although it continues to be normatively focused on its partnership and sovereignty. This evolution highlights the increasing importance of humanitarian diplomacy as a major element in the relations between India and South Asian states and an approach to trust-building, conflict prevention and cooperative security without any concrete instruments of coercion.

Case Studies: India's Humanitarian Assistance as Peacebuilding in South Asia

This section analyses how humanitarian aid provided by India has been used in practice as a peacebuilding instrument in South Asia. This section will also illustrate how humanitarian relief has helped bring stability, inculcate trust and prevent conflict in diverse political environments through detailed contextual case studies of individual South Asian countries. In contrast to the evolutionary overview that has been discussed in the preceding section, this section will envisage events, operations and project-based interventions by linking them to peacebuilding outcomes.

Nepal: From Infrastructure Diplomacy to Integrated Humanitarian Resilience

India has approached Nepal with a distinct form of interdependence that has been shaped by the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship and an open border, which has developed over time into the more institutionalised process of disaster management and health resilience through a model of disaster response and health resilience that has become a mechanism of continued peacebuilding in Nepal. After achieving independence, India began helping Nepal to lessen its geographic seclusion by connecting it to India through projects like the Tribhuvan Rajpath (1956), which connected Kathmandu with the Indian borderlands and facilitated the transport of goods considered essential by Kathmandu, e.g., movement of medical supplies, goods and services. (Jha, 2020). India provided humanitarian assistance several times and in large volumes to Nepal in response to earthquakes, floods, droughts, landslides, and the COVID-19 pandemic. An earthquake of “6.5 killed more than 1,500 people in 1995; India deployed 10 search and rescue (S&R) teams, mobile hospitals consisting of approximately 100 medical personnel, and 500 tonnes of relief material. In 1997, the Terai floods impacted approximately 300,000 people, and India contributed \$5 million; 200 km of roads were repaired, and supplies were provided. India provided 10,000 tonnes of food, 500,000 litres of drinking water and farm inputs during a drought in 1998. In the 1999 Koshi floods (2 million affected), India provided 15,000 tonnes of relief, 10,000 tents, 20,000 blankets and helped to rebuild 5,000 homes. This was further institutionalised during the 2008 Kosi floods when India was involved in humanitarian relief delivery to Nepal” (Chandra, 2025). India proved how humanitarian engineering would stop multiple displacements and political turmoil by considering hydrological stability in Nepal as its own security.

India was a first responder to the devastating Nepal earthquake of 2015 by deploying a mission during the hours of the tragedy that they named Operation Maitri (Operation Friendship). The Indian Army, Air Force, and National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) were in close coordination to work on this huge exercise of a humanitarian nature. Indian Air Force promptly introduced heavy-lift transport aircraft, such as C-17 Globemaster, C-130J Super Hercules, IL-76s, Mi-17, and Advanced Light Helicopters to search, rescue, and drop supplies to areas that were not accessible. (Ministry of Defence, 2015).

“The Indian Army sent out 18 medical teams and established full-functioning field hospitals that treated thousands of injured victims. Also, Engineer Task Forces (ETFs) were deployed to remove debris, restore power, and clear blocked roads. In an outstanding evacuation exercise, India evacuated more than 43,000 Indian nationals through road and air, as well as hundreds of foreign nationals, and gave them transit visas.”

- Yadav, 2015

“On the ground, there were around 1,000 NDRF staff who were pressed into duty to undertake search and rescue operations with the assistance of sniffer dogs. Relief items contained more than 50 tonnes of water, 22 tonnes of food packets, medicine, blankets, and tents. There were also former servicemen of the Gurkha Regiments involved in the operation to lead relief teams, which serves as a reminder of the strong connection between the two countries.”

- India Today, 2015

India redefined its strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nepal received more than one million doses of vaccines under the Vaccine Maitri program. In the 2021 COVID-19 Delta wave, India provided liquid medical oxygen to Nepal. The vulnerability of the Himalayan ecosystem has also led to the need to have a rapid-response mechanism; after the Jajarkot earthquake (November 2023) and the disastrous monsoon floods of 2024, India institutionalised its support with the delivery of the relief tranches of basic medical and shelter supplies expeditiously. After the Jajarkot earthquake, India engaged in humanitarian aid by airdropping more than 11 tonnes of emergency relief equipment valued at INR 10 crore in the form of tents, tarpaulins, blankets, sleeping bags, essential medicines and medical gadgets, including portable ventilators, to Nepal by special Indian Air Force C-130 aircraft. (Embassy of India, 2023). The consignment of 4.2 tonnes of humanitarian aid consisting of tarpaulins, sleeping bags, blankets, Chlorine tablets, and water bottles was moved to Nepalgunj and was to be received by the people in Nepal afflicted by the flood and landslides in October 2024 (Embassy of India, 2024). The Government of India has undertaken more than 550 High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) in Nepal since 2003 in such sectors and has completed 488 projects.

Bangladesh: From Liberation Humanitarianism to Economic Stabilisation

The humanitarian involvement of India in Bangladesh is historical, going back to the 1971 Liberation War, when the humanitarian disaster became intertwined with security interests. By December 1971, the total refugee population had reached close to 10 million in India, and the operation of resettlement incurred costs estimated at US\$700 million at a time when India was struggling economically domestically. The magnitude of displacement also posed a threat to

the internal condition of India, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dealt with this humanitarian disaster with military action to set an early precedent of humanitarian intervention on moral justification and stabilisation. During the post-war era, humanitarianism had taken a new form as disaster diplomacy and market-based stabilisation. The involvement of India in Operation Sea Angel (1991) during the disastrous cyclone in Bangladesh was a rare case of US-India humanitarian coordination in the Bay of Bengal, which indicated that India is open to working in multilateral settings. (Smith, 1995). The 1998 floods further intensified the structural intervention process as India helped export 1.3 million tonnes of rice, which stabilised the food markets in Bangladesh and prevented famine. (Ninno *et al.*, 2022). India's first-responder doctrine was centralised in the event of Cyclone Sidr (2007) by offering a USD 1 million relief package and waiving its ban on rice exports. (Bagchi, 2007) (The Times of India, 2007). India was put to the test in its humanitarian balancing efforts by the 2017 Rohingya crisis. India provided food and relief aid to Bangladesh through Operation Insaniyat, at the same time providing developmental aid to the Rakhine State of Myanmar. (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). This two-path policy was a product of Realpolitik limitations: India wanted to support Dhaka and not to provoke Naypyidaw because of the issue of security connected to the insurgent safe havens in Myanmar. By 2024-2025, India had followed the path of economic humanitarianism in the context of political instability in Bangladesh by providing sugar and onion exports to Bangladesh to stabilise food prices. (Karim, 2024).

Pakistan: Interrupted Humanitarianism and the Primacy of Securitisation

The humanitarian approach of India to Pakistan is an exemplary structurally constrained case in which humanitarian interests are systematically relegated to securitised politics.

“Although both countries have faced the same ecological vulnerabilities and have been affected by common disasters, humanitarian cooperation has been intermittent and has yielded what can be described as interrupted humanitarianism. The signs of this dynamic were manifested early on in 1970 during the Bhola Cyclone in East Pakistan, when India offered help, but Karachi refused it”.

- U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015

This refusal to provide humanitarian access to relief worsened the level of human suffering and led to the political breakdown that preceded the war of 1971, showing that the politicisation of relief can expedite state failure.

“The following decades were limited to humanitarian involvement until the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, which temporarily changed the bilateral dynamics. India opened five crossing points across the Line of Control and sent 1300 tonnes of relief across, in the process temporarily de-militarising a seriously militarised frontier.”

- Ministry of External Affairs, 2006

Nevertheless, the refusal of Pakistan to allow the Indian pilots or continued cross-border civilian travel highlighted the ineffectiveness of disaster diplomacy in aggressive dyads. (The Guardian, 2005). This vulnerability was strengthened in the 2010 super floods, after Pakistan took a long time to accept India's offering of 25 million dollars as relief and finally channelled

it via the United Nations to evade a bilateral appearance. (Ministry of External Affairs, 2010). Institutionalisation of aid politicisation came about due to prioritisation of political signalling over humanitarian urgency. The result of this trend was the lack of Indian government aid during the disastrous 2022 floods, in which the assistance of the Indian government was greatly required. (The Hindu, 2022).

“During the post-2019 diplomatic freeze, the humanitarian interaction only remained in technically framed areas. In the recent desert locust outbreak in 2020, Indian and Pakistanis specialists organised a programme of pesticide spraying via FAO-mediated systems and proved that ecological risks could overcome the political stalemate in the short run.”

- Bello, 2020

Transboundary air pollution is one factor that led to calls in 2024-2025 to have "smog diplomacy" (The Times of India, 2024). Pakistan is therefore largely a negative or restrictive example of the efficacy of humanitarian peacebuilding in that it demonstrates how ingrained securitisation obstructs relief.

Maldives: Humanitarianism, Security Guarantees and Strategic Competition

Humanitarian participation of India in the Maldives has long defined its participation in the Maldives as a regional security guarantor that is making a transition between crisis intervention and structural resilience-building. This relationship explains how the process of humanitarian assistance takes place at the interplay between security delivery and human survival in small island states. The groundbreaking event came when Indian paratrooper troops landed in the Maldives in an operation named Cactus (1988) to preclude a coup against President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. (Sengupta, 2023). The intervention, which was carried out at the will of the host government and was accompanied by a hasty exit, empowered Maldivian sovereignty and proved that India was the key security provider, as opposed to India having been coercive in its intervention in Sri Lanka a year before. It was in non-military crises that humanitarian statecraft became more intensive.

After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, India initiated Operation Castor, in which it used naval resources with onboard desalination plants to provide potable water to the capital of the Maldives to help prevent any fatalities before other international personnel came. (Ministry of External Affairs, 2004). It was demonstrated once again in the 2014 Male water crisis, when Operation Neer transported 375 tonnes of drinking water by air and more than 2000 tonnes by sea, averting a civil emergency following the fire of the desalination plant in the capital. (High Commission of India, 2014). The humanitarian role of India was also extended by health security cooperation. India provided 30,000 doses of measles-rubella vaccines within 72 hours of an outbreak in January 2020 (The New Indian Express, 2020). Operation Sanjeevani provided 6.2 tonnes of medical assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic and was followed by a programme of providing vaccines called Vaccine Maitri. (Sibal, 2020). According to its regional collaboration and MAHASAGAR outlook, India did a HADR drill at the Maafilaafushi Atoll (04-10 May 2025) with the Maldives National Defence Force to improve

defence and maritime cooperation with the Maldives through mutual disaster response, search and rescue, medical support, logistics support, training and community engagement to provide preparedness to humanitarian disasters. (Ministry of Defence, 2025). At the same time, the act of supplying water from the Tibet glacier by China depicted that even humanitarian commodities themselves have become a tool of geopolitical rivalry. (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2024). The Maldivian example, therefore, indicates the strengths and weaknesses of humanitarian peacebuilding in terms of competitive strategic spaces.

Sri Lanka: From Coercive Intervention to Financial Humanitarianism

The humanitarian interventions by India in Sri Lanka have been in the form of coercive intervention and stabilising support as an indicator of the humanitarian statecraft learning curve. The 1987 Operation Poomalai, where 25 tonnes of food and medicine were airdropped on the Jaffna area with escorts of fighter jets, was the epitome of coercive humanitarianism (Weisman, 1987). Although presented as a mercy operation, it infringed on the sovereignty of Sri Lanka and created deep-rooted bitterness over the long term, committing Colombo to the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, but at the cost of India's credibility. This recalibration was later witnessed with the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, when Operation Rainbow displayed Indian naval ability as a quick first responder without engaging in any kind of political interference. (High Commission of India, 2015). Institutionalised humanitarianism allowed a more enduring peacebuilding contribution. India funded the Suwaseriya ambulance service in 2016 by funding 22 million US dollars to develop a national network of pre-hospital emergency response. (Consulate General of India, 2022). This system was very important during the 2019 Easter bombings when Suwa Seriya ambulances were the main mass-casualty responders, and the role of health infrastructure as a long-term peace-supporting public good was evident. India reiterated this strategy in the 2017 floods when three INS Kirch, INS Shardul and INS Jalashwa were diverted in a few hours in Sri Lanka based on assistance in the form of non-intrusive assistance. (Saxena, 2017).

“During the COVID-19 period, India provided more than ‘25 tonnes of medicines to Sri Lanka in May 2020, gifted 5,00,000 doses of the Covishield vaccine in January 2021, facilitated the transportation of 140 MT of liquid medical oxygen in August 2021, deployed INS Gharial, to deliver medicines and kerosene, airlifted nano nitrogen fertilisers in November 2021, gave one lakh rapid antigen test kits and also offered up a US \$4 billion package of assistance in the form of fuel credit facilities, currency swaps and fertilizer assistance in the 2022 Sri Lankan economic crisis.”

- Ministry of External Affairs, 2024

As the de facto lender of last resort on the island, India stabilised the situation by supplying essentials until IMF aid came, which reversed previous views of India as a coercive hegemon. This model evolved to climate-linked humanitarianism in Cyclone Ditwah in 2025, where India already combined swift relief with multilateral reconstruction planning, and it was an indication of unilateralism developing to lead-partner diplomacy. India sent INS Vikrant to provide immediate relief and provided funding to the tune of US 450 million in climate-resilient reconstruction of the Southern Province of Sri Lanka under Operation Sagar Bandhu in

November 2025 (The Times of India, 2025). Therefore, the case study of Sri Lanka shows how humanitarian statecraft can shift, through coercion, to credibility, the embedding of peacebuilding by financial stabilisation, institutional support and restraint.

Afghanistan: Pragmatic Humanitarianism under Political Non-Recognition

The Indian humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan is part of a pragmatic response to long-term warfare, change of regime, and diplomatic non-recognition. India has continued to emphasise human security by considering medical, nutritional, and infrastructure-based aid rather than seeking to invoke overt intervention.

“Indian humanitarian aid to Afghanistan continued without any formal diplomatic relations with the Taliban in 1999-2001. After the May 30, 1998, earthquake, relief assistance was provided, and in 1999, during widespread displacement in the Shumali plains and Takhar province, 1,000 tents, 25,500 blankets, 140 tonnes of food supplies and 15 tonnes of medicines, medical equipment, and health-related materials were airlifted by the Indians through chartered aircraft.”

- Kumar, 2023

Such shadow humanitarianism created political goodwill in the long term and developed the trust on which the post-2001 engagement of India was built. After the Taliban regime collapsed, India took a development-focused humanitarian approach. One such move was Biscuit Diplomacy (2003), under which India donated fortified biscuits to the UN World Food Programme, which supplied greater than one million Afghan schoolchildren a day. (United Nations, 2003). The novelty surpassed transit limits imposed by Pakistan and proactively attached the Indian assistance to domestic-based welfare. This was supplemented by infrastructure and health projects such as the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health in Kabul.

“Following the Taliban takeover of 2021, India refined the principle of state-building to survival-based humanitarianism. India bypassed regional blockades, sending more than 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan via a humanitarian corridor through Chabahar Port, generated by the Food Corporation of India and carried through Attari-Jalalabad and allocated by the UN World Food Programme. India also donated 500,000 doses of the COVAXIN, 13 tonnes of essential medicines, and 500 units of winter assistance, given to the WHO and Indira Gandhi Hospital, Kabul, confirming its humanitarian support to the people of Afghanistan.”

- Ministry of External Affairs, 2022

In 2025, India renewed its humanitarian pledge to the health sector of Afghanistan in a conversation between the Indian Health Minister JP Nadda and the Afghanistan Public Health Minister. India reconsidered and increased collaboration on healthcare infrastructure, medical supplies and capacity building, including maternity clinics, a 30-bed Kabul hospital and specialised oncology, trauma, diagnostic and thalassemia centres. India provided 327 tonnes of medicines and vaccines, ready cancer medicines and a CT scan to ship, and took up additional equipment orders. Capacity building involved medical camps, training of Afghan doctors, Jaipur Foot camps, free treatment in India, and issuing 500+ visas, such as 200 medical visas, coupled with ongoing food and emergency aid (Press Information Bureau, 2025). India showed that humanitarianism can be used to maintain a strategic presence without formal recognition

when it upgraded its technical mission to an embassy-level engagement. Afghanistan is therefore a prime example of peacebuilding in the most extreme circumstances, where pragmatic humanitarianism replaces traditional diplomacy.

Bhutan: Structural Humanitarianism and Preventive Peacebuilding

The humanitarian involvement of India in Bhutan is an illustration of structural humanitarianism, in which long-term developmental aid is employed as preventive peacebuilding. This began with Project Dantak (1961), as a result of which the Border Roads Organisation built more than 1,600 kilometres of roads, which ended geographic seclusion in Bhutan and allowed the constant transportation of medical supplies, food, and administrative services. (Ministry of Defence, 2021). These interventions were developmental in nature but with distinct humanitarian implications as they minimised vulnerability and strengthened the capability of states. This resilience was enhanced by health cooperation. The Malaria Control Programme (1965) of Bhutan, with help from India, saw a statistically decreasing prevalence of the disease in southern Bhutan, and further cooperation with the programme was extended to tertiary healthcare. (Yangzom *et al.*, 2012). After the 2012 fire that gutted Wangdue Phodrang Dzong, India pledged ₹1 billion to rebuild the cultural heritage because it was realised that cultural heritage keeps social sanity. (Embassy of India, 2021).

In the COVID-19 pandemic, Vaccine Maitri provided by India offered unrestricted reinforced public health security to the Bhutan state with 550,000 ‘Made in India’ COVID-19 vaccines. (Embassy of India Thimphu, 2021). The involvement of humanitarian activities also spread to cultural resilience.

“The Gyaltsuen Jetsun Pema Wangchuck Mother and Child Hospital in Thimphu was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay of Bhutan through Indian assistance as part of the humanitarian aid that India had offered the kingdom. The 150-bed hospital was built in two phases; Phase I, which costs ₹22 crore, has been in operation since 2019, and Phase II, which is part of Bhutan's 12th Five-Year Plan, costing ₹119 crore. The hospital offers high-tech maternal, neonatal, pediatric, gynaecology, obstetrics, and critical care, which represents a strong India-Bhutan healthcare collaboration.”

- Prime Minister's Office, 2024

“The focus of India shifted to economic resilience by 2025. Through the 13th Five-Year Plan (2024-2029) of Bhutan, India promised the largest amount yet of 10,000 crores, including specifically Gelephu Mindfulness City and the digital infrastructure to reduce youth migration and post-pandemic economic stress.”

- Prime Minister's Office 2025

“In October 2025, Indian humanitarian aid to Bhutan was reiterated as India Air Group deployed two helicopters of Sevoke Road Aviation Base to Phuentsholing, rescuing three displaced civilians during poor weather after Bhutan could not operate its own air assets, a move that the Royal Government of Bhutan formally thanked India, and which explains why India is considered an integral part of Bhutan's disaster response.”

- The Hindu, 2025

Bhutan, therefore, shows that humanitarian aid that is inherent in development diplomacy could serve as a preventive peacebuilding, maintaining stability through trust, capacity-building and long-term resilience.

Discussion

In South Asia, the humanitarian aid provided by India cannot be adequately described with the traditional lens of emergency relief. Instead, the empirical observations through Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Afghanistan, Bhutan and the contrasting case of Pakistan have shown that humanitarian intervention has been turned into a strategic, non-coercive tool of peacebuilding and regional stabilisation. India has instituted the unique model of humanitarian diplomacy by incorporating humanitarian relief with development cooperation and resilience-building, as a result of which India has transformed the ways of state behaviour, bilateral trust and regional security relationships in South Asia. Theoretically, the findings criticise the strict divide between humanitarianism, development and peacebuilding that constitutes much of the literature on liberal peace. Instead of assuming that humanitarian assistance is politically neutral and normatively detached, the Indian experience rather renders how humanitarian interventions serve as a gradational tool of stabilisation, extending between short-term assistance and long-term capacity-building in an institution. It is consistent with the global developments in international relations where the non-traditional security threats, including disasters, pandemics, economic collapse, and climate vulnerability, have become at the core of diplomatic interests. In this respect, the Indian approach is an adaptive reaction to the South Asian realities in which crises are not occasional but inherent and structural.

In terms of state behaviour, the Indian humanitarian diplomacy is a type of strategic restraint but not a hegemonic domination. In contrast to coercive intervention or conditional assistance, humanitarian engagement by India, to a large extent, is not a political imposition or regime engineering. Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan are examples of how aid is provided without necessarily contravening sovereignty, yet still influencing. This strategy enables India to stabilise its neighbourhood without precipitating balancing behaviour and resistance that is often linked with overt power projection. Humanitarian aid, therefore, manifests itself as a means of dealing with interdependence and not as a form of imposing dominance. This is especially evident when contrasting Sri Lanka back in 1987 and Sri Lanka today in 2022. The classical transition from coercive humanitarianism to financial and institutional stabilisation points to a learning curve in Indian statecraft. It was shown through the 2022 economic crisis response that financial humanitarianism, credit lines, fuel support, and providing essential commodities can play a role in peacebuilding as well as in post-conflict reconstruction. India contributed to building increased credibility and legitimacy by being a lender of last resort without imposing political conditions, weakening the understanding of its role in the region as an interventionist instead of an interventionist. At the regional level, the findings indicate that humanitarian aid is associated with cooperative security in South Asia. India's first-responder role in disaster-prone conditions, such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Maldives, has minimised the risks of crisis escalation, spillovers of refugees, and political destabilisation. This is a type of preventive peacebuilding that functions below traditional security politics and yet delivers real security results. This understanding of humanitarian action is an instrument to build confidence, which maintains dialogue despite the existence of political tensions.

However, the example of Pakistan depicts the structural constraints of humanitarian peacebuilding. In a place where bilateral ties are highly securitised and where identity-based

hostility is widespread, humanitarian aid has become politicised and divided. The failure to institutionalise disaster coordination between India and Pakistan proves that humanitarian diplomacy is incapable of replacing the lack of political trust. This counterexample demonstrates that humanitarianism will be most efficient as a peacebuilding intervention when it is working in an environment of controlled rivalry or competition, and not deep-rooted hostility. The Afghan case goes an extra mile by ensuring that a pragmatic humanitarianism is acknowledged in the circumstances of non-recognition. India's long-standing humanitarian aid, despite the regime changes and limitations on diplomatic relations, indicates that even without official political action, humanitarian aid may help to maintain strategic roles. Rather, humanitarian response is a type of soft diplomacy, which maintains long-term mutual goodwill and normative legitimacy. India's Vaccine diplomacy initiative at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic was based on the ancient philosophy of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam", which states that the world is one family, as India took the lead during a catastrophic public health emergency and reached out to vulnerable countries in the same way that a family member would for a fellow family member. Singh and Raj further highlighted that "during the pandemic, India established itself as the top supplier of vaccines, not only from a commercial standpoint but also from a humanitarian one as a result of India's donations of vaccines and other necessary medical equipment to other countries and international organisations" (Singh and Raj, 2025).

When taken together, these cases display a unique Indian vision of peacebuilding which contrasts with the Western liberal peace paradigms. Instead of focusing on political conditionality, institutional reform imperatives, or even externally guided governance agendas, India has centred on resilience, capacity-building, and continuity. In this context, peacebuilding is not an external imposition as a project, but rather a gradual process that is inherent in development cooperation and humanitarian responsiveness. This bears significant consequences for the conceptualisation of peacebuilding in the Global South, especially in the areas where sovereignty sensitivity and post-colonial political consciousness are dominant. In a wider international relations context, the article adds to the discussion of middle power and regional order behaviour. Indian humanitarian foreign policy represents an example of how a regional actor can offer influence in the form of non-military delivery of public goods that can influence regional stability without creating counter-balancing. Humanitarian assistance enables India to maintain normative leadership and strategic relevance without going overboard in an era of mounting strategic rivalry in South Asia, especially with the increasing involvement of external powers.

Conclusion

The humanitarian assistance that India has provided to South Asian countries has developed into a systematic and conscious approach to peacebuilding, which is heartily coordinated with its foreign policy orientation and its regional interests. Specifically, the results indicate that humanitarian engagement has become a part and parcel of the Neighbourhood First policy of India through which New Delhi attempts to stabilise its immediate periphery by responding to non-traditional security challenges that include disasters, health emergencies, economic crises and climate vulnerability. Through the emphasis on quick response, prolonged assistance and

enduring stability, India has continued to elevate humanitarian aid as a way of building trust, interdependence and collaborative security within a fragile political environment where political crises are recurrent. The article categorises several Indian peacebuilding models using humanitarian aid in South Asia. These encompass first responder disaster diplomacy, institutional and health-based humanitarianism, financial and economic stabilisation in the event of systemic crisis, and preventive peacemaking by long-term developmental assistance. In all these models, humanitarian aid does not simply act as relief but as a stabilising intervention that alleviates the escalation of crisis, minimises the chances of political instability and promotes the post-crisis recovery. This multi-dimensional strategy is part of the progressive changes in the humanitarian practice of India since the early solidarity-based development assistance has changed into a more institutionalised, integrated structure of humanitarian diplomacy. The rise of India as a net security provider in South Asia is directly connected to this development. India has become a viable first responder in the region through its capability of deploying military and civilian resources to provide humanitarian help and disaster relief. This position has enabled India to influence the stability and peace in the region, as opposed to using coercive tools or formal security assurances. Humanitarian aid, therefore, serves as a model of non-military security assistance, which strengthens stability without being insensitive to issues of sovereignty and their political dimension. The analysis reveals that this strategy makes India more legitimate and receptive in the region, especially in comparison to previous periods of interventionist actions.

India's contemporary peacebuilding strategy, as operationalised through humanitarian assistance, has been predominantly of a non-coercive orientation. Unlike the liberal approaches to peacebuilding, which tend to be based on political conditionality, governance reform requirements or direct intervention, the humanitarian policy of India in South Asia has moved towards more partnership, recipient ownership and continuity of assistance. In this context, peacebuilding is sought in a gradual manner and integrated into development cooperation and resilience-building as opposed to being externally facilitated by political restructuring. Although humanitarian action does not entirely exclude strategic calculation, its practice has remained mostly free of general coercion, so that the assistance strategy can act as a confidence-building tool that over time increases trust and institutional ability, even in complex and post-conflict situations. Finally, in conclusion, the research argues that the humanitarian aid provided to South Asian countries by India is a deliberate approach to peacebuilding. India has been able to develop a unique model of peacebuilding by aligning humanitarian action with development diplomacy and regional stabilisation agendas to the political, social and security realities of South Asia. Humanitarian aid is, therefore, not a peripheral component to Indian regional policy but its core component in its quest to bring about peace, stability and cooperative order in its neighbourhood.

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**Everyday Feminism, Organised Activism and Peace Practices in India:
Special Focus on Instagram Reels.**

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To cite this article:

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 Volume 15, Issue 1, 2025



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Everyday Feminism, Organised Activism and Peace Practices in India: Special Focus on Instagram Reels

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Abstract

This paper explores everyday feminism on Instagram Reels in the context of micro-activism and peace practice in contemporary India. Using feminist theories (Butler, de Beauvoir), technofeminism, and data-feminist perspectives, it analyses 40–50 purposively sampled publicly accessible reels that explore issues of gendered violence, bodily autonomy, caste and classed injustice, and everyday resistance. Using qualitative content analysis and a situated, affective lens, the study traces the use of recurrent genres (testimonial, dramatization, humour, pedagogy), narrative strategies, and visual aesthetics, in which personal experiences translate into public pedagogy. highlight the way in which short-form reels have the potential to amplify marginalized voices, develop digital solidarities, and create micro-publics that facilitate incremental peacebuilding through empathy, care, and collective witnessing. At the same time, the paper stresses tensions: algorithmic visibility biases, commercialization of feminist content, selective reach favoring urban/elite creators, and risks of online harassment and traumatisation. Placing these practices in the context of India's socio-political hierarchies, the study shows that quotidian digital performances contest and reproduce structural inequalities. The paper concludes by asking for implications for feminist practice, platform governance, and policy, advocating for algorithmic accountability, inclusive digital literacy, and support infrastructures that sustain grassroots feminist expression and protect vulnerable creators. This study provides novel understandings of everyday digital activism and an in-depth understanding of Instagram Reels as sites of feminist peace practice.

Keywords: Everyday feminism; Instagram Reels; digital activism; gender justice; micro-activism; technofeminism; feminist counterpublics; digital peace practices; India; online gender violence; algorithmic bias; digital publics.

Introduction

Digital technology has significantly entered the day-to-day lives of individuals in recent times. It has changed the way people interact, communicate, share ideas, form opinions, and build identities about one another. Mass mobilization, the feminist online digital movement, and political participation through social media are increasingly changing how social norms and power structures are circulated and contested. Social media, including Twitter, X, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and others, is gradually becoming an integral part of everyday human life. In this context, everyday digital activism is gaining popularity among scholars as a powerful tool to address problems that have persisted for ages and now affect the everyday lives of women/girls, driven by the emergence and widespread access to digital and social media. When various patriarchal contents, including memes trolling, victim-blaming, and objectification,

discourage the access of women/girls, it is interesting to understand how everyday digital feminism is creating counterpublics.

In India, social media has become a mirror and a battleground, where thoughts, selfies, opinions, and testimonies are no longer private acts. As a result, over the past decade, the digital space has witnessed a remarkable rise in feminist articulation. Sharing thoughts and feelings is no longer taboo for many women, largely due to Reels culture. The recent trend of online hashtag campaigns, including #MeToo, #Pinjratod, #happytobleed, and #DalitWomenFight, emerged from everyday posts by women. As powerful tools of social change, these digital platforms can provide a common platform for the diverse heterogeneous groups found in India (Upadhyay & Upadhyaya, 2024). The solidarity formed on digital media acts as a medium for feminist expression, narrative justice, and collective mobilization (Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022; Jain, 2020). However, the question remains as to how this collective solidarity affects or is affected by millions of reels floating on social media. The #MeToo movement, while fostering collective solidarity, primarily reached urban, upper-caste, and English-speaking women (Ahlawat, 2022), limiting its intersectional reach. This raises questions about its transformative impact on women's lived realities and highlights the need for more inclusive digital solidarities that build nonviolent resistance and intersectional peace through broader empathy and shared witnessing. Understanding this gap, this paper focuses on everyday feminism, drawing on small social media reels that deliver a strong real-life message. These are the small victories that may not make a huge political impact but encourage individuals with similar experiences to break the silence and contribute to the bigger picture of the patriarchal social order. Drawing from this idea, this research paper analyses how everyday online repetition of gender issues acts as a small political aim for organised activism and peace practices in India.

Theoretical Framework: Reconceptualizing Feminism in Daily Digital Spaces through Everyday Feminism on social media

The feminist project has long sought to understand how structures of patriarchy are reproduced in daily life and how resistance can also emerge from within those everyday spaces. Significant works by Judith Butler (1990) and Simone de Beauvoir (1949) changed this perspective by defining gender as a social construct. It is produced through the daily repetition of norms, and the gendered body is a site of performance and resistance. In the present scenario of the digital era, these performances reach virtual spaces, where women, queer, and marginalized users' express identity, agency, and resistance through online content such as Instagram Reels, memes, and short videos. In this context, everyday feminism constitutes a small political act that questions gender norms through storytelling, humor, or artistic self-representation. These micro-scale feminist practices transform the ordinary into the political via distributed, decentralized, and personal methods—contrasting with formal activism or coordinated campaigns (Ahmed, 2017)—and represent a micro-act of feminist expression embedded in the culture of visibility, what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) terms popular feminism.

In India, everyday feminism is primarily seen on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Pages like @Feminisminindia, @Genderatworkindia, and countless independent creators use Instagram Reels to discuss body image, consent, menstruation,

domestic labour, and caste privilege. These performances transform personal experience into public pedagogy, reframing the domestic and intimate as political terrains of resistance. Everyday feminist content thus redefines activism itself by moving from street protests to algorithmic visibility, from collective slogans to reels of solidarity.

From Organized Activism to Everyday Digital Practices

The prevalence of digital posts can be traced back to a social movement in India that sought legal and societal changes. The women's movements during the 1970s and 1980s, including anti-dowry initiatives and independent women's groups, represent key advancements spurred by collective efforts (Kumar, 1993). In a similar vein, the digital era has opened avenues for activism, exemplified by organized digital feminist campaigns like #MeTooIndia and #PinjraTod as well as everyday expressions of feminism conveyed through personal stories and creative content on social media platforms (Jain, 2020; Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022; Upadhyay & Upadhyaya, 2024). Digital feminist activism, as conceptualized by Radhika Gajjala (2019), occurs through entanglements of labour, affect, and everyday digital practice.

Women and queer users engage in activism not always through hashtags or movements, but through daily practices, humour, and visibility. According to Nancy Fraser (1990), this reflects alternative discursive spaces where marginalized people use the concept of counterpublics to construct oppositional meanings. These digital counterpublics are composed of regular feminist Instagram creators who turn corporate platforms into feminist micro-spheres of discussion, solidarity, and criticism (Udapa et al., 2021).

In this context, separating the personal from the political proves challenging. In the digital era, the notion previously articulated by feminists that "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1969) resurfaces in the form of "the personal is performative." The everyday problem of double burden, suppression of basic needs, absence of emotional support, or unsafe environment for girls/women is expressed online through reels. These small gestures of self-representation, known as micro-activism, when multiplied across individuals, build momentum for larger social transformations and turn into activism in the setting.

Affective and Visual Politics of Everyday Feminism

Digital platforms such as Instagram operate through what Banet-Weiser (2018) and Gill (2016) describe as a culture of visibility. A culture where empowerment is often expressed through visibility on digital platforms, through hashtags, selfies, or campaigns that circulate widely. A system that rewards emotional resonance, relatability, and aesthetic appeal. Everyday feminism adapts to this logic by translating feminist ideas into affective, visual, and performative registers. A humorous reel mocking sexist advertising, or a visual montage celebrating bodily diversity, can communicate feminist critique more viscerally than a manifesto.

This affective mode of communication is fundamental in India's multilingual, class-diverse social media ecosystem, where textual activism often remains elitist or English-centric. To make feminist rhetoric approachable and emotionally impactful, everyday feminism utilises humour, regional aesthetics, and vernacular vocabulary in reels and meme content. According to Nivedita Menon (2012), feminist politics in India should be grounded in real-world power

struggles rather than impersonal universalism. Many artists have to choose between vulnerability and visibility, between algorithmic performance and genuine advocacy. Social media allows for transforming local and lived experiences into shareable, visualized narratives of dissent.

However, this visibility comes with contradictions. Srila Roy (2022) cautions that neoliberal cultures of self-branding, consumption, and commodification of women shape digital feminism. This is a usual trend on online platforms. Similarly, Sahana Udupa (2021) cautions that online hate, trolling, and misogyny stifle feminist expression, exposing the enduring nature of digital patriarchy manifested in online gender violence (Gajjala, 2019). Nonetheless, everyday feminists create areas of support and solidarity within these limitations, redefining strength in everyday, digital forms.

Indian Contexts, Algorithmic Culture, and Technofeminism

Theoretical perspectives from data feminism and technofeminism shed more light on the relationship between daily feminism and technology. Judy Wajcman (2004) reminds us that technology isn't neutral and it carries the values and power structures of the society that creates it. Building on this idea, Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein (2020) in *Data Feminism* show how algorithms often privilege certain body types, languages, and aesthetics, while pushing others to the margins.

In the Indian context, technology is not neutral and is shaped by entrenched socio-digital hierarchies. Algorithmic discrimination often silences marginalized groups (Jalwal & Kumawat, 2021). Those who are in lower hierarchies often struggle to be heard. This phenomenon produces digital infrastructures that appear egalitarian but encode patriarchal bias through design called "gender glitch" (Lakshmi Pillai Gupta, 2023).

The usage of vernacular language by everyday feminists on social media is an effort to break the structure that is embedded in a biased way. Some intentionally use alternative aesthetics or vernacular language to challenge mainstream visibility norms, while others use humor and popular noises to challenge platform logics. These strategies are a prime example of the idea of technofeminist agency (Wajcman, 2004). Thus, the everyday feminist reel becomes both content and critique: it participates in the entertainment economy while subtly reprogramming its patriarchal scripts. The digital sphere becomes a site of feminist negotiation, not merely a space of representation.

Everyday Feminism as a Peace Practice

Feminist peace theorists such as Johan Galtung (1969), Cynthia Enloe (2000), and Carol Cohn (2013) have provided an understanding of positive peace rooted in gender justice. Feminist scholars extend this by arguing that peace is not only a geopolitical condition but also a set of social relations and daily practices grounded in care, empathy, and nonviolence (Cockburn, 2010; Manchanda, 2017). Applying this to digital contexts, Paula Banerjee (2019) introduces feminist infrastructures of peace, where mutual support, emotional ties, and networks of solidarity — often built through affective, relatable content — uphold justice even outside formal activism. Reels addressing consent, self-care, or gender respect shift online culture from

animosity to empathy and from silence to listening. For example, as seen in the 'ring the bell' campaign reel (findinggoodads, 2025 October), children interrupt domestic violence by ringing the doorbell to stop the abuser — a digital revival of the 2008 Bell Bajao initiative that uses visual relatability and emotional resonance to demonstrate bystander responsibility, inviting dialogue over aggression and transforming antagonism into collective understanding through a micro-politics of peace.

These actions support Enloe's (2000) contention that peace is not only created through formal negotiations or political agreements but also through everyday relationships in homes, friendships, and workplaces, as concretely illustrated when reels like the 'ring the bell' intervention clip (findinggoodads, 2025 October) normalise collective care by showing ordinary people disrupting gendered violence in domestic spaces.

Thus, by normalising equality, acknowledgement, and communication in daily life, everyday feminism supports peacebuilding as a cultural, human-centric process (Manchanda, 2017). On Instagram, this manifests as collective care, reporting abusers, forming support groups, amplifying marginalised voices, and circulating bystander-intervention content like the 'ring the bell' reel (findinggoodads, 2025 October), which constitutes digital care networks (Gajjala, 2019) that sustain peace through shared resistance rather than silence. By circulating such content, including bystander-focused reels like the 'ring the bell' example, everyday feminism bridges affective resonance from earlier visibility cultures with tangible micro-practices of nonviolent interruption, reinforcing peace as an ongoing, relational process.

Everyday Feminism as Digital Counterpublic and Social Change

In the online feminist spaces on social media, the personal becomes political because individuals share their everyday struggles to raise collective awareness and demand social change. Everyday feminists understand this as an alternative arena of discussion and expression that exists outside mainstream media, and often acts as a counterpublic (Fraser, 1990). By doing so, they build a new form of collective identity based on their own narratives in the form of images, art, or digital content.

Feminist artists participate in what Butler (1990) may refer to as performative subversion using Instagram clips. Ironically, repeating gendered gestures reveals their manufactured character. Laughter turns into criticism when a film dramatizes workplace sexism or makes fun of "good girl" tropes. Such content also performs what Sara Ahmed (2017) describes as the "feminist killjoy" function: disrupting patriarchal comfort by naming sexism in spaces that prefer silence.

In India, everyday feminist counterpublics are also intersectional and broaden the definition of peace and justice to encompass caste and communal equality. Apart from patriarchal norms, diversifying feminist discourse, including savarna and heteronormative dominance, is also challenged by Dalit, queer, and Muslim individuals within mainstream feminism through social media usage (Rege, 2018; Soundararajan, 2022). Everyday feminism thereby becomes a decolonial digital practice that bridges the gap between global feminist language and local epistemologies.

Methodology

To comprehend everyday feminist activism, the study employed a qualitative content analysis method. It treats digital content as the primary source of data, focusing on Instagram reels with a feminist outlook. These reels are understood as forms of everyday self-expression that challenge established gender biases. The approach aligns with feminist epistemologies, which value the personal, situated, and relational dimensions of knowledge production (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991).

Research Questions

The following key questions guide the study:

- How do 30–60-second everyday reels act as small forms of micro-activism to challenge biased norms?
- What types of content are disseminated to challenge established patriarchal structures?
- What kinds of visuals, emotions, texts, or dialogues are used to advance everyday feminism in these Instagram reels?

In what ways does this micro-activism in the digital sphere contribute to the culture of peace?

Sampling and Data Collection

The data consist exclusively of gender-related content reflecting the everyday challenges of girls and women. Only publicly accessible reels that were not part of sponsored advertisements were included in the study. Initially, around 150 reels were identified using hashtags related to gender issues. From this pool, 40 to 50 reels were categorized by theme. The significant issues depicted include female foeticide, girl-child rights, child abuse, domestic violence, early marriage, and the mentality of Indian men toward critical gender issues. Additionally, positive reels with deep messages and realizations were also analysed to reflect ongoing positive change. The purpose of selecting these reels was to conduct a focused, in-depth analysis. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify content relevant to everyday feminism. This choice is based on the understanding that 30–60-second reels, due to their brevity and accessibility, are easy to scroll through yet leave a significant, often unconscious impact on viewers' perceptions and attitudes. The researcher, positioned as a feminist scholar in India, approached analysis with reflexivity to mitigate bias and enhance situated understanding of the socio-cultural contexts shaping these digital narratives.

Everyday Lived Experiences on Gendered Violence

This category consists of Instagram reels that document real-life incidents of gender violence, discrimination, and everyday inequality, often recorded through direct testimonies, journalistic fragments, or eyewitness visuals. Several reels expose the continuity of the practices of female foeticide, as taken from a BBC documentary, revealing astonished confessions of midwives on the killings of newborn girl children. When reporters ask them how and why they killed them, they confess that they had killed them by burying them in a pot, making them lick salt and urea fertiliser on the dictates of male members of the family. Another reel surfacing on social media is a video made by a female doctor. She is holding an abandoned newborn girl child to raise awareness among others on this issue (Kiddaan, 2025 April). Real-life incidents of abandoning

a child are also coming from the reels, showing the visuals of a train where parents intentionally left the baby girl on the platform. Indian women have faced this dilemma for ages, where they have been asked to abandon the girl child (true.line_, 2025 November). A recent interview featuring Pooja Chopra's mother highlighted her troubling choice between leaving her in-laws' home or giving up her daughter (Bathai Rasam et al., September 2025). These reels expose the harsh, often hidden, realities of gendered injustice in India, taking viewers directly into domestic, rural, and public spaces where patriarchal violence is enacted (Chakravarti, 2003; Menon, 2012).

Beyond foeticide and abandonment, many reels in this category highlight everyday experiences of domestic violence and sexual assault that surface through personal recordings or survivor-led disclosures. Another video surfacing on the internet is a video of a young girl describing the violence inflicted on their mother by their father and grandparents, which ultimately led to the death of their mother (patna_dastak, 2025, September). Other reels document everyday domestic violence cases, including a woman dying after being handed over to a stranger, while another depicts a husband violently cutting his wife's hair for not wearing a scarf and openly beating his wife for trivial reasons (Jayati_Unscripted et al., 2025 August; aapkarajasthan, 2025 November). These videos are disturbing and graphic, yet they possess the potential to ignite minor acts of defiance. One such video shows the extensive burn injuries on a woman named Khushbu, inflicted by her husband using a heated knife. This not only highlights the reality of domestic violence but also showcases the bravery of women who are beginning to raise their voices against it (Indiatoday, August 2025). Multiple reels portray women arriving at police stations or livestreaming their experiences, asserting their refusal to remain silent. These reels reveal how social media has become a powerful tool of individual-level activism, where short clips on critical issues connect women and girls who experience similar forms of daily injustice (Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022; Jain, 2020; Luna, 2024).

Further examples include reels documenting the deprivation of girls' education among tribals and marginalised sections of society due to early marriage. One video follows Varsha, a tribal girl interviewed by a journalist, who became a mother at fourteen, illustrating the intersection of caste location, poverty, and gendered vulnerability (pinch_report, 2025 October; Rege, 2018; Thorat & Newman, 2010). Another reel features a Brahmin father openly recounting how he routinely beat his daughter, even heating an iron rod "to teach her a lesson," reflecting how child abuse is normalized in some households and how such violence leaves deep psychological trauma (bathai_rasam et al., September; all ears. therapy, 2025 September). The girl, Prachi, appears resigned to her circumstances, yet the circulation of her story online demonstrates how social media can transform private suffering into public testimony. Instead of focusing on promotional materials, these reels are based on reality and deliver unvarnished insights into the current state of gender injustice. They exemplify how digital platforms enable micro-activism and digital witnessing, where ordinary individuals use personal narratives to challenge patriarchal norms and bring marginalised experiences into the public sphere (Ahmed, 2017; Upadhyay & Upadhyaya, 2024; Ahlawat, 2022; Gangoli, 2024).

Awareness Reels and Sensitive Narratives

This category of reels focuses on real-life experiences of gendered oppression, domestic violence, and societal injustice, often delivered through emotionally impactful, short videos. One reel depicts a young girl told by her mother to change her path because a stranger blocked her way (Subtitle, 2025 October). This carries a strong message, “It’s not your fault,” highlighting the subtle fear and restrictions girls face in public spaces. Another reel shows a girl symbolically cutting her hair and dressing like a boy. Upon inquiring about the reasoning behind her friend's situation, she explains that her older sister was denied access to education solely due to her gender (expressvialyrics, September). This clip navigates systemic gender restrictions by showing lived experiences and acts of micro-resistance against entrenched patriarchal norms (Rege, 2018; Chakravarti, 2003).

The videos capturing the positive realization reel portray a mother holding her daughter’s hand, preventing her from hiding bruises with makeup, symbolizing a break in the cycle of silence and demonstrating resistance against normalized abuse (S.J. Editxx, 2025 September). Similarly, the 'ring the bell' campaign clip shows children intervening in domestic violence, emphasizing bystander responsibility (findinggoodads, 2025 October). These narratives collectively show how violence is maintained not only physically but through silence, family expectations, and unquestioned cultural practices (Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022).

Some reels explore the normalization of misogyny and patriarchal mentality among Indian men. Young boys claim girls should restrict their movement to avoid blame for sexual harassment (discovering_likes, 2025 November; theraapix, 2025 September). Older men justify domestic violence and blame rape victims (abhisha8414, 2025 August; naarifuelhub, 2025 September; mr_futuristic_7, 2025 June; pyaare_memes, 2025 September). Rape accused and the defence lawyer blame the woman in the tradition of Indian society (log_bakchod, 2025 August). These reels reveal how patriarchal control is reproduced across generations, homes, and institutions, shaping societal expectations that restrict women’s autonomy and condone gendered violence. Across all these videos, the central theme is creating awareness by showing their actual mindset, systemic inequality, and everyday resistance. These reels function as digital micro-activism, encouraging viewers to recognize and challenge normalized gender injustice (Ahmed, 2017; Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022).

Influential Feminist Voices and Discourses in India

The prominent feminist figures in India harnessing digital platforms like Instagram effectively highlight significant gender-related concerns by promoting women's narratives. They confront systemic inequalities and raise awareness about addressing gender injustices. UN Women India utilizes Instagram to bring attention to critical matters, including online harassment, violence against women, and the rights of women. These posts often incorporate real-life stories and collaborations with public figures to make these topics relatable and urgent. The National Commission for Women (NCW) shares information on legal rights, women’s helplines, and institutional initiatives, offering both practical guidance and inspiration. SheThePeopleNEWS highlights daily feminist topics by sharing individual stories related to workplace disparities, societal norms, and women's accomplishments. Meanwhile, WIF India (Women’s Initiative Foundation) creates educational materials and advocacy initiatives that honor women’s roles

and promote civic participation. Feminism in India complements this digital ecosystem by addressing a broad spectrum of gendered realities, including period poverty, invisible domestic labor, the “double shift” of work and home, mental health, patriarchal conditioning, early marriage, and structural inequalities, while also highlighting gendered conflicts from Kashmir to Gaza (Ahmed, 2017; Chakravarti, 2003; Rege, 2018; Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022).

Together, these platforms form a network of feminist discourse in India that combines institutional authority with personal, intersectional storytelling.

Analysis & Discussion:

An analysis of the selected Instagram reels shows that everyday feminist expressive content in India ranges from real-life incidents to dramatized videos. The first category of everyday experiences can be conceptualized as a form of micro-activism that nurtures digital peace cultures. It relies on emotional tone and storytelling style. Widespread awareness reels and sensitive narratives extend feminist action by drawing attention to genuine gender concerns. Through the use of visuals and dramatization, such as facial expressions and moments of silence, these reels communicate affective depth. In contrast, the influential feminist pages employ expressive, bold, and vocal techniques to amplify voices and translate everyday digital performances into collective protest.

Although the initial selection of reels reveals entrenched algorithmic bias and gendered glitches, it also demonstrates a shift in peacebuilding practices in the digital era. Together, everyday feminism and organized activism reinterpret peace as justice grounded in everyday resistance to gender injustice. This discourse reveals how gendered hierarchies operate and how activism can respond. Activism today is not only about organized marches and petitions but also about the subtle, persistent work of cultivating courage, relatability, and broader peaceful digital cultures through everyday expression.

This process works in a circular motion: beginning with everyday digital practices, moving to micro-activism, then to digital counterpublics, and finally to digital feminist infrastructures of peace. It demonstrates how feminist activism in India blends organized advocacy, everyday storytelling, and micro-activism, transforming social media into a tool for collective awareness and resistance (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Menon, 2012; Banerjee & Kankaria, 2022).

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Comparative Analysis of Algorithmic Bias in Assessments: India and the U.K. Perspective in Higher Education

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To cite this article:

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 Volume 15, Issue 1, 2025



CENTRE FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPEMENT, VARANASI, 221005

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Abstract

The paper explores the emergent challenge of Algorithmic Bias in Artificial Intelligence (AI) assessments within Higher Education. As colleges and universities increasingly integrate AI and Machine Learning (ML) into various operational domains, including admissions, advising, and course evaluation, there is a growing concern about the perpetuation and amplification of existing racial, class, and other socio-economic biases. This paper presents a comparative analysis of Algorithmic Bias in AI assessments within higher education institutions in India and the United Kingdom (UK). Utilizing secondary data sources, including systematic reviews, government reports, and academic studies, we explore how AI is integrated into educational processes and the resultant equity implications in these diverse educational landscapes. The study examines the challenges of ensuring fair AI assessments in light of the unique cultural, regulatory, and technological contexts of each country. This comparative approach offers insights into global educational practices and strategies to mitigate bias in AI. Aligning with Sustainable Development Goals 4 (SDG-4) and 16 (SDG-16), this research underscores the importance of equitable quality education and the promotion of inclusive and just institutions. It presents actionable insights for responsibly leveraging AI in higher education, reinforcing the commitment to fair and equal opportunities for all students.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), Higher Education, Algorithmic Bias, India, United Kingdom (UK)

Introduction And Overview

The dawn of the 21st century has heralded an era of unprecedented technological advancement, transforming various sectors, including higher education. Amongst the integration of myriads of technologies into educational systems globally, Artificial Intelligence (AI) stands out. This

has sparked a revolution in how teaching, learning, and administrative functions are executed in colleges and universities. However, alongside the numerous benefits, the integration of AI within the domain of higher education has raised significant concerns and ethical debates. One of the pressing concerns is the issue of Algorithmic Bias, which threatens to undermine the very foundation of educational equity and fairness (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

The emergent phenomenon of Algorithmic Bias within AI applications extends far beyond mere technological glitches; it encompasses a complex web of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional disparities (Abgaryan et al., 2023). These biases, often rooted in the datasets that train AI systems, have the potential to perpetuate and amplify existing prejudices within educational settings, impacting admissions, grading, advising, and more. Such developments call for urgent scholarly attention, particularly from a comparative perspective, to understand the multifaceted nature of this challenge across different educational landscapes.

In pursuing this investigation, the paper navigates through a structured exploration, starting with a thorough literature review, thereafter, highlighting the critical literature gap; rationale of the study that aims to unravel the intricacies of creating equitable educational environment through the lens of AI assessments; followed by a detailed methodology, culminating in findings that shed light on the specific issues of concern related to AI and Assessment Bias within the higher education contexts of India and the UK, as well as providing critical actionable insights to address the pressing issues. This scholarly endeavour seeks to reinforce the commitment to fair and equal opportunities for all students, steering the future of education towards a more inclusive, equitable, and technologically advanced horizon.

Understanding Artificial Intelligence

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be traced back to the period when Alan Turing proposed the 'Turing Machine,' which indicated that when a stage is reached where no credible differentiation can be made between human response and machine response, it can be termed as artificial intelligence. AI deals with the human cognitive process and its decision-making capabilities (Smith, 2006).

Four categories of AI have been proposed - *first* is AI that thinks like humans. This relates to hardware or software components, collectively referred to as "machines", that are used in operations commonly connected to human thought processes, for instance, AI in problem-solving and decision-making. The *second* category is acting "humanly", where machines perform tasks that humans would normally perform, such as operating a vehicle. The *third* category consists of logically-thinking machines, which are distinct from the second category, due to their emphasis on computational processing of logic as opposed to mere imitation of human thought processes. The *fourth* and last category consists of machines operating logically. In this case, machines would engage in activities like conversations that humans consider to be "intelligent" (Russell and Norvig, 2016).

AI is usually divided into three groups, each of which is an evolution of the next (Fawad, 2023):

- i. **Artificial Narrow Intelligence (ANI):** ANI concentrates on a single task or issue at a time. It is particularly good at specific tasks like product recommendations, weather

forecasting, and helping users with apps like Google Assistant, Google Translate, Alexa, etc. ANI has the ability to understand human voice and text, and reply to it in a personalized, natural way by using Natural Language Processing (NLP). Presently, the modern AI industry is dominated by ANI.

- ii. ***Artificial General Intelligence (AGI)***: AGI aims to achieve human-like cognitive capability to effectively mimic human behaviour. It integrates multiple ANI systems. Even though AI is still in its nascent stage, top tech companies are now working on achieving AGI. Notably, it takes a lot of time and computing power to simulate even a small portion of human neuro-activity.
- iii. ***Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI)***: The vision of an AI system that is superior to humans in all areas, including behaviour, relationships and decision-making, may be termed as ASI. The creation of this ‘superintelligent’ system is expected to be facilitated by artificial general intelligence (Fawad, 2023).

The applications of AI that are now in use are very limited. It is unable to truly understand abstract human notions like emotions, thoughtfulness, creativity etc. At the moment, they are better at solving linear issues than they are at comprehending a wide range of concepts or human experiences.

Literature Review

Algorithmic Bias in AI Assessments:

Big Data inferences, with regard to AI assessments, lead to a realm of the unknown, where it can get difficult to interpret and bring forth the inherently embedded human biases. This may lead to validation of historically evident biases (Krittanawong et. al, 2017). These biases concern gender, ethnicity, exclusivity, representation of race, class etc that are already prevalent societal inequalities. Apart from this, majority of the data and regulatory framework stem from the American viewpoint, thereby, representing a skewed assessment of world view (Watcher *et al*, 2021). Implicit discrimination has been detected in multiple avenues such as government housing regulations, judicial reasoning, online search suggestions etc (Mittelstadt and Floridi, 2016, Datta *et al*, 2017). Apart from this, employment market has overwhelmingly begun to rely on automated processes and data analytics. Pre-existing biases would, therefore, apprehend potential job seekers in the future, who may have exceptional educational and technical skills; however, would fail to qualify as suitable candidates in the job market, which is a resultant effect of Algorithmic Bias (Banerjee *et al*, 2018). In order to avoid potential biases and ethical concerns in search results, constant improvisation of AI algorithms and AI analytics will play a crucial role in aiding human decision-making. The AI training mechanism necessitates magnanimous quantum of learners’ data, which may include critical and information, for training AI models. “Intelligent tutoring” is key to diagnosing inherent biases, thereby, predicting and preventing Algorithm Bias in AI assessments (Chen, 2020, Yang, 2021).

Algorithmic Bias in Higher Education:

Within higher education, the deployment of AI raises critical questions concerning Algorithmic Bias and its impact on educational equity. Algorithmic decisions in admissions, grading, and advising hold the potential to perpetuate existing socio-economic and racial disparities, making the examination of these biases crucial. As Baker and Hawn (2022) point out, Algorithmic Bias has manifested in various educational processes, necessitating expanded algorithmic approaches to reducing bias, and ensuring fairness in education. There is a need to inculcate pointed approach in education, which can leverage the usage of Machine Learning as well as AI analytics in learning, in order to improve effectiveness of both teach teaching and learning, with special attention being provided to at-risk students (Yang et al, 2021). Pessach and Shmueli (2023) call for developing fairer algorithms, and designing procedures to reduce biases in data, specifically in educational setting, which has been less explored compared to other sectors. Kordzadeh and Ghasemaghahi (2022) emphasize that while there are extensive discussions on the legal, ethical, and design implications of Algorithmic Bias, only a fraction delves into the educational sector, indicating a need for comprehensive studies in this domain. Lee (2018) identifies that while Algorithmic Bias has been a significant issue within AI research, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that dissect these biases in the sphere of higher education, particularly in a comparative international context. The cases of India and the UK have been chosen for the study due to their distinct educational systems (Pedro et al., 2019; Bhutoria, 2022), cultural contexts (Chatterjee & Bhattacharjee, 2020), and levels of AI integration (Alam, 2021), providing a diverse spectrum for analysis.

Literature Gap

While a significant volume of existing studies broadly focuses on technical development, application capabilities, and ethical implications of AI, there remains a conspicuous gap in the literature that specifically addresses the impacts of AI in the domain of Higher Education, particularly across a comparative cultural and socio-economic landscape of countries like India and the UK. This gap is crucial, as such socio-economic fabric and cultural nuances significantly influence AI's application and its resultant biases in educational settings.

Rationale of the Study

This paper seeks to delve into the intricate dynamics of Algorithmic Bias within AI assessments in higher education, focusing on two distinct landscapes - India and the United Kingdom (UK). The choice of these countries for comparative analysis is deliberate, stemming from their diverse educational systems, cultural contexts, and varying levels of AI integration (Atlas, 2023). India, with its vast socio-economic diversity and rapid technological adoption, presents a unique case of how Algorithmic Bias intersects with existing societal disparities. Conversely, the UK, with its established educational framework and progressive technological policies,

offers insights into how such biases are identified and addressed within a more regulated environment (Chen et al., 2020).

By exploring these contrasts, the study aims to uncover underlying patterns, challenges, and opportunities that arise from the integration of AI in the domain of higher education. It aligns with global educational goals and ethical standards, particularly those outlined in Sustainable Development Goals 4 (SDG-4) and 16 (SDG-16), advocating for equitable quality education, and the promotion of inclusive and just institutions (UN, 2015). Through a comprehensive comparative analysis, this research aspires to contribute actionable insights for responsibly leveraging AI in higher education, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that acknowledges both the potential and the pitfalls of this transformative technology. By examining the intersection of AI, education, and socio-economic disparities, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how educational equity can be maintained in the age of AI, aligning with global educational goals and ethical standards.

Methodology

The methodological approach for this study is rooted in Documentary Research Methodology (DRM), a qualitative research technique that is particularly suited to exploring complex social phenomenon such as Algorithmic Bias in educational contexts. DRM, for the analysis of various forms of documents and texts, offers insights into historical and contemporary contexts, policies, and practices. This approach is critical in educational research, as it facilitates a deep understanding of institutional practices and policy impacts, contributing significantly to the field of educational leadership and administration (Cardno, 2018).

To justify the approach of the present study, the work of Weller (2019) is referenced, who discusses the use of group discussions and documentary method in educational research. This approach supports the qualitative analysis of social phenomena, enabling researchers to delve into complex and nuanced social dynamics, and relationships that underpin educational systems and processes. Furthermore, the documentary method, as discussed by Reischl and Plotz (2020), emphasizes upon the interpretation of documentary evidence to discern both manifest and latent meanings. This methodological stance allows the current research work to move beyond surface-level interpretations, and address the deeper, systemic and multifaceted issues related to Algorithmic Bias in understanding pedagogical interactions and educational dynamics (Martens and Asbrand, 2022). It also allows to contribute to broader discussions on social justice and educational equity, which aligns with efforts to illuminate and address issues of inequality and bias within educational systems (Friend and Caruthers, 2016), underscoring its appropriateness and value in examining comparatively the intricate dynamics of Algorithmic Bias in higher education settings in India and the UK.

Findings

This segment delves into how AI's integration is reshaping academic environments, bringing forth significant challenges such as ethical dilemmas and societal disparities. By comparing the diverse approaches of India and the UK, this discussion unveils the varying degrees of AI's

influence across different socio-economic and cultural landscapes, thereby, highlighting the need for tailored strategies to ensure educational equity. It underscores the urgent call for ethical standards, collaborative efforts, and inclusive practices in the deployment of AI technologies in education. This section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issues at hand, and suggests actionable insights for mitigating biases and fostering a more equitable educational framework globally.

Issues of Concern Related to AI & Assessment Bias in Higher Education: The Case of India

In India, the integration of AI within higher education is redefining traditional academic environments. This technological evolution, however, brings to the forefront the pressing issue of Algorithmic Bias (UNESCO, 2022). UNESCO emphasizes the urgent need for governmental intervention in collaboration with the private sector through public-private partnerships. This call to action is critical to ensure ethical development and application of AI technologies, aiming to mitigate risks and uphold ethical standards. It states that AI is a matter of importance that needs to be handled by the government because of the risks and ethical concerns involved, as multiple private-sector players are participating to develop new products. Hence, the government should come out to work with the private sector by means of Public-Private Partnership (PPP), and form policies to regulate the development taking place. Accountability plays a crucial role, as results produced by advanced AI would be difficult to understand, distinguish, and comprehend by most people. It also focuses on the marginalisation of Indian diversity, and the potential risk associated with AI under such conditions. If this continues, AI will be producing a future based on the past, discouraging societal advancements.

NITI Aayog (2021) has provided a range of ethical principles for the design, development, and deployment of AI in India in an attempt to leverage its full potential in the country under a responsible ecosystem. Tamil Nadu is the first state in India to release a policy guideline on AI Ethics, using the “DEEP-MAX Scorecard.” It is a rating mechanism for AI systems, based on seven ethical parameters – Equity, Diversity, Ethics, Misuse Protection, Privacy and Data Protection, Audit and Transparency, and the Digital Divide and Data Deficit (Dwivedi, 2019). Sambasivan (2021) presents seven axes of potential Machine Learning (un)fairness in India. It includes the sub-groups of ethnicity, gender, religion, caste, class, ability, and sexual orientation. Therefore, these flaws need to be corrected first to make AI work fairly in the Indian higher education system. For instance, when a Google search for ‘South Indian Masala’ is done, the results display sexually suggestive images of women, and not spices. This is a reflection of not just flawed algorithms and data processing by AI, but also an uncomfortable reflection of societal stereotypes (Marda, 2018).

Appropriate training of data for AI in the higher education system is required to get rid of algorithmic biases and discrimination. 75@75 INDIA’s AI journey discussed AI initiatives with several stakeholders such as government bodies, academic fraternity, domain practitioners etc. Specifically in the context of India, the cases of vernacular and folk pedagogies are sidelined as education in English medium is privileged over local or regional languages. Additionally,

the current syllabi reflect the urban upper class, upper caste, Hindu and male biases of syllabi developers (Kasinathan, 2020). AI incorporates such biases, thereby, providing an avenue to legitimize it in the system. Thus, datasets having such pre-existing biases are bound to lead to predictive models that reinforce social discrimination, further affecting students of marginalised sections adversely. INDIA AI (2021) identified the primary factors of biases in AI - human evolutionary problems, digital access problems, organisational data problems as well as limited auditing facilities for AI applications.

UNESCO (2023) recommended policy actions with regard to ethics of AI in higher education. It gave eleven recommendations and how each could be understood and implemented through the lens of higher education, with specific actions that Higher Educational Institutions can take. The recommendations included Ethical Impact Assessment, Ethical Governance and Stewardship, Data Policy, Development and International Cooperation, Environment and Ecosystems, Gender, Culture, Education and Research, Communication and Information, Economy and Labour, and Health and Social Wellbeing. The document also discussed the three areas where dependence on data can create and perpetuate bias: the process of labelling data, choice of dataset, and replication cognitive bias.

Conclusively, the Indian higher education system needs to consider the above-mentioned recommendations to draft policies and avoid biases, since data-driven decision-making is susceptible to inaccuracies, embedded biases, discriminatory outcomes, and unintended consequences due to procedural limitations (Marda, 2018).

Issues of Concern Related to AI & Assessment Bias in Higher Education: The Case of the United Kingdom (UK)

In the United Kingdom, the application of AI in higher education is approached with a commitment to fairness and ethical considerations, reflecting the nation's broader regulatory and ethical framework. Studies such as those by Puyol-Antón et al. (2021) and Vassilopoulou et al. (2022) have illuminated the proactive measures the UK has undertaken to ensure that AI applications, including those in higher education, are developed with a profound awareness of ethical standards and societal impacts. This includes the implementation of rigorous Ethical Impact Assessment, establishment of transparent AI governance frameworks, and formulation of policies that safeguard data protection and privacy. In the educational domain, these measures aim to create AI systems that facilitate learning, without perpetuating existing socio-economic disparities. Furthermore, the UK's methodical approach to algorithmic bias in higher education is informed by its commitment to fairness, extending across various sectors. This stance is indicative of a mature understanding of AI's multifaceted nature, where biases are acknowledged as part of the broader socio-technical systems rather than mere technical glitches. This understanding facilitates the design and implementation of educational AI systems that are equitable and do not perpetuate existing biases. By considering the ethical implications of AI in education, the UK aims to ensure that these systems support fair and inclusive educational practices.

Despite the UK's advances in ethical AI frameworks, there remain significant challenges in the higher education sector. The primary concern revolves around the effective implementation of

these frameworks to prevent biases in AI assessments. Ensuring that all students have equal access to AI-enhanced education, devoid of discrimination based on socio-economic status, race or background, is paramount. The UK's experiences highlight the critical need for robust ethical frameworks coupled with continuous monitoring to mitigate biases effectively in educational AI applications.

In conclusion, while the UK has made significant strides towards ethical AI integration in higher education, ongoing vigilance and adaptation are required to address persistent and emerging challenges. The lessons learned from the UK's experience are invaluable, not only for India, but for any country looking to harness AI in education responsibly. By fostering an environment where technology enhances learning outcomes without reinforcing biases, the UK continues to strive towards a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape. This effort aligns with global educational goals, emphasizing the necessity of balancing technological advancement with ethical and equitable practices in the era of AI.

Comparative Assessment of Algorithmic Bias in Higher Education: The Cases of India vis-à-vis the United Kingdom

Algorithmic biases in AI assessments exhibit diverse manifestations in the educational contexts of India and the UK, influenced significantly by each country's unique cultural fabric. In the UK, research indicates a broader focus on fairness in AI across various sectors, including healthcare and human resources, suggesting a heightened awareness and proactive approach towards ethical AI applications (Puyol-Antón et al., 2021; Vassilopoulou et al., 2022). This reflects a comprehensive approach to mitigating biases, potentially applicable to educational AI systems. Conversely, India's distinct socio-economic landscape, characterized by pronounced disparities, raises concerns about AI assessments amplifying existing inequalities. While direct studies on education are sparse, analogous research in areas like healthcare underlines the potential for AI biases to exacerbate societal divides, a hypothesis that can be extended to the educational domain (Chatterjee & Bhattacharjee, 2020).

The studies by Puyol-Antón et al. (2021) and Vassilopoulou et al. (2022) reflect an environment where the implications of AI are scrutinized not just for their technological merits, but also for their ethical and societal impacts. This approach is indicative of a more mature understanding of the multifaceted nature of AI, where biases are not merely seen as technical glitches, but as issues embedded within the broader socio-technical systems. The UK's focus on ethical AI applications offers valuable insights into how educational AI systems can be designed and implemented, ensuring they are equitable and do not perpetuate existing biases. It highlights the importance of considering the ethical implications of AI in education, ensuring that these systems support fair and inclusive educational practices.

Contrasting the UK's approach, India's unique socio-economic landscape presents different challenges regarding AI assessments in higher education. Characterized by pronounced socio-economic disparities, India faces the risk of AI assessments amplifying existing inequalities. Analogous applications of AI in healthcare often reflect broader societal trends and issues that are equally relevant in educational contexts. Rodriguez et al. (2020) discuss the influence of

AI in healthcare services in India, highlighting its role in improving customer service and experiences. However, they also caution that AI cannot replace the essential ‘human touch.’ This balance between technological advancement and human interaction is critical in understanding how AI might similarly influence educational systems, potentially amplifying existing societal disparities, if not managed carefully. Key obstacles to integrating AI into healthcare include increased workload, challenges in adopting technology, and the need for a skilled workforce (Muduli and Swain, 2023). These challenges mirror potential issues in the educational sector, where the integration of AI could exacerbate existing inequalities due to differences in access to technology, digital literacy, and educational resources. Lee and Yoon (2021) examine AI's applications and discuss both the opportunities and challenges it presents. They note that while AI can improve operational efficiency, it also presents challenges, including ethical considerations, data privacy, and potential bias.

The above-mentioned insights, when applied to the domain of higher education, could have similar dual effects - enhancing learning and administrative efficiency, while also posing risks of bias and unequal access. This potential for AI biases to deepen societal divide is particularly pertinent in the educational sector, where such biases could further disadvantage already marginalized groups. In India, where educational access and quality vary widely across different socio-economic strata, the implementation of AI without careful consideration of these disparities could exacerbate existing inequalities. This scenario necessitates a nuanced approach to AI in education, one that is acutely aware of the socio-economic realities and is designed to ensure fairness and equity for all students. The Indian context, therefore, calls for AI systems in education that are not only technologically advanced, but also socially aware and designed to bridge, rather than widen, the educational divide.

The comparison between the UK and India in terms of algorithmic bias in AI assessments in higher education reveals the importance of cultural nuances and socio-economic contexts in shaping AI applications. While the UK's approach is framed within a broader ethical discourse and regulatory framework, India's challenges are intertwined with its unique socio-economic conditions. This comparative analysis underscores the fact that algorithmic bias is not a unidimensional issue that can be addressed through technical solutions alone. Instead, it requires a holistic understanding of the cultural, social, and economic fabric of each country. The insights from these two diverse contexts provide valuable lessons for other countries and regions implementing AI in education. They highlight the need for AI systems to be designed with a deep understanding of local contexts, ensuring that they cater to the specific needs and challenges of different educational environments. This approach is crucial in ensuring that AI systems in higher education are fair, inclusive, and beneficial for all students, irrespective of their socio-economic or cultural backgrounds.

Actionable Insights For Mitigation

Mitigating algorithmic bias in AI assessments within higher education requires a multifaceted approach, intertwining ethical, educational, and technological strategies.

- i. The foundational step involves the **adoption of comprehensive ethical AI frameworks** by educational institutions. These frameworks should not only adhere to high ethical standards but also incorporate regular impact assessments to systematically identify and mitigate biases (Puyol-Antón et al., 2021; Vassilopoulou et al., 2022). By embedding ethical considerations into the AI development process, institutions can ensure that AI systems align with the values of equity and fairness.
- ii. **Collaboration between academia, government and the private sector** plays a pivotal role in the development of inclusive AI systems. This tripartite partnership is essential for pooling resources, expertise, and perspectives, thus, fostering the creation of AI tools that cater to diverse educational needs and contexts (United Nations, 2015; Sambasivan et al., 2021). Such collaborative efforts can lead to the establishment of ethical guidelines and best practices that guide AI application in educational settings.
- iii. **Diversity in training datasets** is crucial to prevent the perpetuation of historical biases. Educational AI systems should be trained on datasets that are representative of the diverse student populations they serve (O'Neil, 2016; Sambasivan et al., 2021). By ensuring diversity and inclusivity in the data, institutions can minimize the risk of biased outcomes and foster an educational environment that respects and understands the myriad identities of its students.
- iv. **Transparency in AI algorithms and decision-making processes** is paramount to building trust among stakeholders, including students, educators, and policymakers (Eubanks, 2018; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Institutions should strive to make AI systems' workings understandable and accessible, enabling stakeholders to critically assess and question the technology.
- v. Educational institutions should prioritize **digital literacy programs to enhance students' and educators' understanding of AI tools**. This empowerment through knowledge enables users to engage with AI systems more effectively and critically, fostering a more equitable educational technology landscape.
- vi. Continuous **monitoring and auditing of AI systems**, complemented by robust **feedback mechanisms**, are essential for identifying and addressing biases (Pessach & Shmueli, 2023). Regular reviews and updates to AI systems can help ensure they remain fair and effective, adapting to changing educational needs and societal norms. Feedback from students and educators is invaluable in this process, providing real-world insights into AI systems' performance and impact.
- vii. Lastly, **fostering international cooperation and sharing best practices** to establish a global standard for ethical AI in education (Vinuesa et al., 2020). By collaborating on a global scale, educational institutions can learn from each other's successes and challenges,

paving the way for universally applicable solutions that promote fairness and equity in educational AI applications.

Conclusion

In summary, the mitigation of algorithmic bias in AI assessments within higher education necessitates a comprehensive and proactive approach. By implementing ethical frameworks, fostering collaboration, ensuring data diversity, promoting transparency and digital literacy, conducting continuous monitoring, and engaging in international cooperation, educational institutions can take significant steps toward creating equitable AI-enhanced learning environments. These actionable insights, grounded in academic research and best practices, provide a roadmap for institutions seeking to responsibly leverage AI in higher education, ultimately contributing to the advancement of a more inclusive, fair, and empowered global educational landscape. The actionable insights gleaned from this study—spanning the development of comprehensive ethical frameworks, fostering collaboration, ensuring data diversity, enhancing transparency, promoting digital literacy, and advocating for continuous monitoring and international cooperation—formulate a roadmap for institutions worldwide.

The journey of integrating AI into the Higher Education Framework presents an overview of both immense potential and significant challenges. This comparative analysis has unearthed the nuanced interplay of algorithmic bias in AI assessments within the higher education systems of India and the United Kingdom. Through this scholarly endeavour, an effort has been made to delve deep into the contrasting landscapes shaped by the distinct socio-economic and cultural fabrics of these countries. The study has attempted to reflect upon the possibilities of integrating AI for educational transformation, without forgetting that it also harbours the potential to exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities, if not navigated with conscientious and ethical oversight.

In conclusion, as we stand on the brink of an educational revolution powered by AI, the collective aim should be to steer this transformation towards a landscape marked by fairness, equity, and inclusivity. The findings from this comparative study between India and the UK accentuate the imperative for a global dialogue and concerted efforts among all educational stakeholders. By embracing a culturally sensitive and ethically grounded approach to AI integration, the higher education sector can transcend traditional boundaries, paving the way for an era where technology acts as a bridge rather than a barrier to educational equity. The study also calls for continued research and dialogue in this domain. As AI continues to evolve, so too should our strategies for ensuring that its integration into education uplifts all students, regardless of their socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. It is in our collective interest to harness the transformative power of AI to craft an educational future that is not only technologically advanced but also inherently just and equitable.

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